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No.19

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT OF

THE OUTLAW

or THE LAST OF THE DUANES

By ZANE GREY

ALSO SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

2/-

Duane struck up Kate Bland's gun, calling to Jennie to run out

The Outlaw, Chap. 9

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NOVEL (magazine abridgment)
The Outlaw, or The Last of the Duanes — *Zane Grey* 3

NOVELETTE
Found at Blazing Star — *Bret Harte* 138

SHORT STORIES
Ranger Luck — *Eugene Cunningham* 98
Doc Sperry's Big Case — *Giff Cheshire* 112
The Star-Faced Blacks — *Frank C. Robertson* 122

PICTURE STORY
Sam Bass — *Carl Smith & Dan Muller* 89

FACT FEATURE
Too Tough to Kill — *Edwin L. Sabin* 134

VERSE
Longhorn Cupid — *S. Omar Barker* 132

DEPARTMENTS
How Well Do You Know Your Range Terms ? — *James A. Hines* 121

Cover picture by Earl Sherwan—Frontispiece by Al Kortner

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Published in the United Kingdom by World Distributors (Manchester) Ltd., by arrangement with Western Printing & Lithographing Company, Racine, Wisconsin, U.S.A., authorised Zane Grey Publishers. Printed in Great Britain at the Philips Park Press by C. Nicholls & Company Ltd.

This Month's Magazine Abridgment

BUCK DUANE'S *voice is steel-hard and icy as he calls out his warning. The tall form of Bland, the rustler chief, wheels with catlike speed —then freezes as Bland grasps the significance of Duane's menacing position. Gazing into the other's eyes, Duane reads there the desperate calculation of chances that is being made—and then Bland's whole frame seems to vibrate as he goes for his gun.*

This is only one of the gripping scenes that fill the smashing-action story of Buck Duane's outlaw years which appeared in Argosy *magazine under the title "The Last of the Duanes," and later was published in book form as Book One of "The Lone Star Ranger." Buck Duane's gun-fighting father was famous for having pulled trigger twice after a bullet plowed through his heart—and Buck has that same indomitable spirit. Realizing that he has inherited a fighting instinct, an impelling urge to kill, he strives to curb the power of that terrible force until the day when Cal Bain shows up full of whisky and hunting for him. Then Buck Duane throws his gun on a man for the first time, and the die is cast. He leaves home and family for the doubtful sanctuary of the Texas border country, stamping-ground for hundreds of wanted men—rustlers and gunfighters.*

In the camp of rustler chief Bland, Duane is forced to use his death-dealing ivory-handled .45 both to defend himself and to help the girl who is Bland's captive. After a final fight in Bland's camp, Duane becomes the most notorious lone wolf of the border. The quarry in a savage man hunt, he pits his great strength and endurance against a hundred embattled ranchers determined to capture him alive. Seriously wounded, Duane comes through with an exhibition of courage and resourcefulness which will thrill even the most hard-boiled Western-story reader. He gets away, however, only to run into still more danger, culminating in a dramatic encounter with a Ranger captain.

The story of Buck Duane ranks with the very best that Zane Grey ever wrote in vividness of background, colorful frontier characters, and blazing outdoor action.

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The Outlaw or The Last of the Duanes

By ZANE GREY

Chapter One

Grim Heritage

SO it was in him, then—an inherited fighting instinct, a driving intensity to kill. He was the last of the Duanes, that old fighting stock of Texas. But not the memory of his dead father, nor the pleading of his soft-voiced mother, nor the warning of this uncle who stood before him now, had brought to Buck Duane so much realization of the dark passionate strain in his blood. It was the recurrence, a hundred-fold increased in power, of a strange emotion that for the last three years had arisen in him.

"Yes, Cal Bain's in town, full of bad whisky an' huntin' for you," repeated the elder man gravely.

"It's the second time," muttered Duane as if to himself.

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"Son, you can't avoid a meetin'. Leave town till Cal sobers up. He ain't got it in for you when he's not drinkin'."

"But what's he want me for?" demanded Duane. "To insult me again? I won't stand that twice."

"He's got a fever that's rampant in Texas these days, my boy. He wants gun-play. If he meets you he'll try to kill you."

"Kill me! What for?" Duane asked.

"Lord knows there ain't any reason. But what's that to do with most of the shootin' these days? Didn't five cowboys over to Everall's kill one another dead all because they got to jerkin' at a quirt among themselves? An' Cal has no reason to love you. His girl was sweet on you."

"I quit when I found out she was his girl."

"I reckon she ain't quit. But never mind her or reasons. Cal's here, just drunk enough to be ugly. He's achin' to kill somebody. He's one of them four-flush gun-fighters. He'd like to be thought bad. There's a lot of wild cowboys who are ambitious for a reputation. They talk about how quick they are on the draw. They ape Bland an' King Fisher an' Hardin an' all the big outlaws. They make threats about joinin' the gangs along the Rio Grande. They laugh at the sheriffs an' brag about how they'd fix the rangers. Cal's sure not much for you to bother with, if you only keep out of his way."

"You mean for me to run?" asked Duane in scorn.

"I reckon I wouldn't put it that way. Just avoid him. Buck, I'm not afraid Cal would get you if you met down there in town. You've your father's eye an' his slick hand with a gun. What I'm most afraid of is that you'll kill Bain."

Duane was silent, letting his uncle's earnest words sink in, trying to realize their significance.

"If Texas ever recovers from that fool war an' kills off these outlaws, why, a young man will have a lookout," went on the uncle. "You're twenty-three now, an' a powerful sight of a fine fellow, barrin' your temper. You've a chance in life. But if you go gun-fightin', if you kill a man, you're ruined. Then you'll kill another. It'll be the same old story. An' the rangers would make you an outlaw. The rangers mean law an' order for Texas. This even-break business doesn't work with them. If you resist arrest they'll kill you. If you submit to arrest, then you go to jail, an' mebbe you hang."

"I'd never hang," muttered Duane darkly.

"I reckon you wouldn't," replied the old man. "You'd be like your father. He was ever ready to draw—too ready. In times like these, with the Texas rangers enforcin' the law, your dad would have been driven to the river. An', son, I'm afraid you're a chip off the old block. Can't you hold in—keep your temper—run away from trouble? Because it'll only result in you gettin' the worst of it in the end. Your father was killed in a street-fight. An' it was told of him that he shot twice after a bullet had passed through his heart."

"What you say is all very well, Uncle," returned Duane, "but the only way out for me is to run, and I won't do it. Cal Bain and his outfit have already made me look like a coward. He says I'm afraid to come out and face him. A man simply can't stand that in this country. Besides, Cal would shoot me in the back some day if I didn't face him."

"Well, then, what're you goin' to do?" inquired the elder man.

"I haven't decided—yet."

"No, but you're comin' to it mighty fast. That damned spell is workin' in you. You're different today. I remember how you used to be moody an' lose your temper an' talk wild. Never was much afraid of you then. But now you're gettin' cool an' quiet, an' you think deep, an' I don't like the light in your eye. It reminds me of your father."

"I wonder what Dad would say to me today if he were alive and here," said Duane.

"What do you think? What could you expect of a man who never wore a glove on his right hand for twenty years?"

"Well, he'd hardly have said much. Dad never talked. But he would have done a lot. And I guess I'll go down-town and let Cal Bain find me."

Then followed a long silence, during which Duane sat with downcast eyes, and the uncle appeared lost in sad thoughts of the future. Presently he turned to Duane.

"You've got a fast horse—the fastest I know of in this country. After you meet Bain hurry back home. I'll have a saddle-bag ready packed for you and the horse ready."

With that he turned on his heel and went into the house. Duane wondered presently if he shared his uncle's opinion of the result of a meeting between himself and Bain. His thoughts were vague. But when he had settled with himself that he would meet Bain, such a storm of passion assailed him that he felt as if he was being shaken with ague. Yet it was all internal, for his hand was like a rock and, for all he could see, not a muscle about him quivered.

He had no fear of Bain or of any other man; but a vague fear of himself, of this strange force in him, made him ponder and shake his head. It was as if he had not all to say in this matter. There appeared to have been in him a reluctance to let himself go, and some voice, some spirit from a distance, something he was not accountable for, had compelled him. That hour of Duane's life was like years of actual living, and in it he became a thoughtful man.

He went into the house and buckled on his belt and gun. The gun was a Colt .45, six shot, and heavy, with an ivory handle. He had packed it, on and off, for five years. Before that it had been used by his father. There were a number of notches filed in the bulge of the ivory handle. This gun was the one his father had fired twice after being shot through the heart, and his hand had stiffened so tightly upon it in the death-grip that his fingers had to be pried open. It had never been drawn upon any man since it had come into Duane's possession. But the cold, bright polish of the weapon showed how it had been used. Duane could draw it with inconceivable rapidity, and at twenty feet he could split a card pointing edgewise toward him.

Duane wished to avoid meeting his mother. He went out and down the path toward the gate. The air was full of the fragrance of blossoms and the melody of birds. Outside in the road a neighbor woman stood talking to a countryman in a wagon; they spoke to him; and he heard, but did not reply. He strode down the road towards the town.

Wellston was a small town but it was the trading center of several hundred miles of territory. On the main street there were perhaps fifty buildings, some brick, some frame, mostly adobe, and one-third of the lot, and by far the most prosperous, were saloons. From the road Duane turned into this street. It was a wide thoroughfare lined by hitching-rails and saddled horses and vehicles of various kinds.

Duane's eye ranged down the street, taking in all at a glance, particularly persons moving leisurely up and down. Not a cowboy was in sight. Duane slackened his stride, and by the time he reached Sol White's place, which was the first saloon, he was walking slowly. Several people spoke to him and turned to look back after they had passed. He paused at the door of White's saloon, took a sharp survey of the interior, then stepped inside.

The saloon was large and cool, full of men and noise and smoke. The noise ceased upon his entrance, and the silence ensuing presently broke to the clink of Mexican silver dollars at a *monte* table. Sol White, who was behind the bar, straightened up when he saw Duane; then, without speaking, he bent over to rinse a glass. All eyes except those of the Mexican gamblers were turned upon Duane; and these glances were keen, speculative, questioning. Several of the cowboys and ranchers present exchanged glances. Duane had been weighed by unerring Texas instinct, by men who all packed guns. The boy was the son of his father. Whereupon they greeted him and returned to their drinks and cards.

Sol White stood with his big red hands out upon the bar; he was a tall raw-boned Texan with a long mustache waxed to sharp points. "Howdy, Buck," was his greeting to Duane. He spoke carelessly and averted his dark gaze for an instant.

"Howdy, Sol," replied Duane slowly. "Say, Sol, I hear there's a gent in town looking for me bad."

"Reckon there is, Buck," replied White. "He came in heah aboot an hour ago. Shore he was some riled an' a-roarin' for gore. Told me confidential a certain party had given you a white silk scarf, an' he was hell-bent on wearin' it home spotted red."

"Anybody with him?" queried Duane.

"Burt an' Sam Outcalt an' a little cowpuncher I never seen before. They-all was coaxin' him to leave town. But he's looked on the flowin' glass, Buck, and he's heah for keeps."

"Why doesn't Sheriff Oaks lock him up if he's that bad?"

"Oaks went away with the rangers. There's been another raid at Flesher's ranch. The King Fisher gang, likely. An' so the town's shore wide open."

Duane stalked outdoors and walked the length of the long block, meeting many people—farmers, ranchers, clerks, merchants, Mexicans, cowboys, and women. It was a singular fact that when he turned to retrace his steps the street was almost empty. He had not returned a hundred yards on his way when the street was wholly deserted. A few heads protruded from doors and around corners. That main street of Wellston saw some such situation every few days.

Duane walked on. When he came to within fifty paces of a saloon he swerved out into the middle of the street, stood there for a moment, then went ahead and back to the sidewalk. He passed on in this way the length of the block. Sol White was standing in the door of his saloon.

"Buck, I'm a-tippin' you off," he said, quick and low-voiced. "Cal Bain's over at Everall's. If he's a-huntin' you bad, as he brags, he'll show there."

Duane crossed the street and started down. He traversed almost the whole length of the block without seeing a person. Everall's place was on the corner.

Duane knew himself to be cold, steady. He was conscious of a strange fury that made him want to leap ahead. He seemed to long for this encounter more than anything he had ever wanted.

Before he reached Everall's he heard loud voices, one of which was raised high. Then the short door swung outward as if impelled by a vigorous hand. A bowlegged cowboy wearing woolly chaps burst out upon the sidewalk. At sight of Duane he uttered a savage roar.

Duane stopped in his tracks at the outer edge of the sidewalk, perhaps a dozen rods or so from Everall's door.

If Bain was drunk he did not show it in his movements. He swaggered forward, rapidly closing up the gap. Red, sweaty, disheveled, and hatless, his face distorted and expressive of the most malignant intent, he was a wild and sinister figure. He had already killed a man, and this showed in his demeanor. His hands were extended before him, the right hand a little lower than the left. At every step he bellowed his rancor in curses. Gradually he slowed his walk, then halted. A good twenty-five paces separated the men.

"Won't nothin' make you draw, you ——!" he shouted.

"I'm waitin' on you, Cal," replied Duane.

Bain's right hand stiffened—moved. Duane threw his gun as a boy throws a ball underhand—a draw his father had taught him. He pulled twice, his shots almost as one. Bain's big Colt boomed while it was pointed downward and he was falling. His bullet scattered dust and gravel at Duane's feet. He fell loosely, without contortion.

In a flash all was reality for Duane. He went forward and held his gun ready for the slightest movement on the part of Bain. But Bain lay upon his back, and all that moved were his breast and his eyes. The devil that had showed in Bain was gone. He was sober and conscious. He tried to speak, but failed. His eyes changed —rolled—set blankly.

Duane drew a deep breath and sheathed his gun. He felt calm and cool, glad the fray was over. One violent expression burst from him. "The fool!"

When he looked up there were men around him.

"Plumb center," said one.

Another, a cowboy who evidently had just left the gaming-table, leaned down and pulled open Bain's shirt. He had the ace of spades in his hand. He laid it on Bain's breast, and the black figure on the card covered the two bullet holes just over Bain's heart.

Duane wheeled and hurried away. He heard another man say:

"Reckon Cal got what he deserved. Buck Duane's first gunplay—like father like son!"

Chapter Two

The Fugitive

A THOUGHT kept repeating itself to Duane, and it was that he might have spared himself concern through his imagining how awful it would be to kill a man. He had no such feeling now. He had rid the community of a drunken, bragging, quarrelsome cowboy.

When he came to the gate of his home and saw his uncle there with a mettlesome horse, saddled, with canteen, rope, and bags all in place, a subtle shock pervaded his spirit. Sight of the horse and the look of his uncle recalled the fact that he must

now become a fugitive. An unreasonable anger took hold of him.

"The damned fool!" he exclaimed hotly. "Meeting Bain wasn't much, Uncle Jim. He dusted my boots, that's all. And for that I've got to go on the dodge."

"Son, you killed him—then?" asked the uncle huskily.

"Yes. I stood over him—watched him die. I did as I would have been done by."

"I knew it. Long ago I saw it comin'. But now we can't stop to cry over spilt blood. You've got to leave town an' this part of the country."

"Mother!" exclaimed Duane.

"She's away from home. You can't wait. I'll break it to her—what she always feared."

Suddenly Duane sat down and covered his face with his hands. "My God! What have I done?"

"Listen, son, an' remember what I say," replied the elder man earnestly. "Don't ever forget. You're not to blame. I'm glad to see you take it this way, because maybe you'll never grow hard and callous. You're not to blame. This is Texas. You're your father's son. These are wild times. The law as the rangers are laying it down now can't change life all in a minute. Even your mother, who's a good, true woman, has had her share in making you what you are at this moment. For she was one of the pioneers—the fightin' pioneers of this state. It will be many years before that instinct to fight dies out of the boys born in Texas."

"I'm a murderer," said Duane, shuddering.

"No, son, you're not. An' you never will be. But you've got to be an outlaw till time makes it safe for you to come home."

"An outlaw?"

"I said it. If we had money an' influence we'd risk a trial. But we've neither. An' I reckon the scaffold or jail is no place for Buckley Duane. Strike for the wild country, an' whatever you do—be a man. Live honestly, if that's possible. If it isn't, be as honest as you can.

"If you have to herd with outlaws try not to become bad. There are outlaws who are not all bad—many who have been driven to the river by such a deal as this you had. When you get among these men avoid brawls. Don't drink; don't gamble. I needn't tell you what to do if it comes to gunplay, as likely it will. You can't come home. When this thing is lived down, if that time ever comes, I'll get word into the unsettled country. It'll reach you some day. That's all. Remember, be a man. Good-by."

Duane, with blurred sight and contracting throat, gripped his uncle's hand and bade him a wordless farewell. Then he leaped astride the black and rode out of town. As swiftly as was consistent with a care for his steed, Duane put a distance of fifteen to eighteen miles behind him. After that he slowed up. He passed several ranches and was seen.

This did not suit him, and he took an old trail across country. It was a flat region with a poor growth of mesquite and prickly-pear cactus. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of low hills in the distance. He had hunted often in that section, and knew where to find grass and water. When he reached this higher ground he did not, however, halt at the first favorable camping spot, but went on and on. He seemed to want to see wide open spaces—to get a glimpse of the great wilderness lying somewhere beyond to the southwest.

It was sunset when he decided to camp at a likely spot he came across. He led the horse to water, and then began searching

through the shallow valley for a suitable place to camp. At last he found a secluded spot, under cover of thick mesquites and oaks, at a goodly distance from the old trail. He took saddle and pack off the horse. He looked among his effects for a hobble, and finding that his uncle had failed to put one in, he cut a few feet off the end of his lasso and used that.

Duane made a small fire, prepared and ate his supper. This done, he sat down and filled his pipe. Twilight had waned into dusk. A few wan stars had just begun to show and brighten. Above the low continuous hum of insects sounded the evening carol of robins. Presently the birds ceased their singing, and then the quiet was more noticeable. When night set in and the place seemed all the more isolated and lonely for that, Duane had a sense of relief.

It dawned upon him all at once that he was nervous, watchful, sleepless. The fact caused him surprise, and he began to think back, to take note of his late actions and their motives. The change one day had wrought amazed him. He who had always been free, easy, happy, especially when out alone in the open, had become in a few short hours bound, serious, preoccupied. The silence that had once been sweet now meant nothing to him except a medium whereby he might the better hear the sounds of pursuit. The loneliness, the night, the wild, that had always been beautiful to him, now only conveyed a sense of safety for the present. He watched, he listened, he thought. He felt tired, yet had no inclination to rest.

This being an outlaw meant eternal vigilance. No home, no rest, no sleep, no content, no life worth the living! He must be a lone wolf or he must herd among men obnoxious to him. If he worked for an honest living he still must hide his identity and take risks of detection. If he did not work on some distant outlying ranch, how was he to live? The idea of stealing was repugnant to him. The future seemed gray and somber.

Why had this hard life been imposed upon him?

The bitter question seemed to start a strange iciness that stole along his veins. What was wrong with him? He stirred the few sticks of mesquite into a last flickering blaze. The black circle of darkness weighed down upon him, closed in around him.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright and then froze in that position. He had heard a step. It was behind him—no—on the side. He forced his hand down to his gun, waited. But all was silent—silent as only a wilderness arroyo can be, with its low murmuring of wind in the mesquite. He began to breathe again.

But what was the matter with the light of his camp fire? It had taken on a strange green luster and seemed to be waving off into the outer shadows. Duane heard no step, saw no movement; nevertheless, there was another present at that camp-fire vigil. Duane saw him. He lay there in the middle of the green brightness, prostrate, motionless, dying.

Cal Bain! His features were wonderfully distinct, clearer than any cameo, more sharply outlined than those of any picture. It was a hard face softening at the threshold of eternity—a different Bain, all that was human in him fading, fading as swiftly as it blanched white. The lips wanted to speak, but had not the power. The eyes held an agony of thought. Then they rolled, set blankly, and closed in death.

That haunting visitation left Duane sitting there in a cold sweat, remorse gnawing at his vitals, realizing the curse that was on him. He divined that never

would he be able to keep off that phantom. He remembered how his father had been eternally pursued by the furies of accusing guilt, how he had never been able to forget in work or in sleep those men he had killed.

The hour was late when Duane's mind let him sleep, and then dreams troubled him. In the morning he bestirred himself so early that in the gray gloom he had difficulty in finding his horse. Day had just broken when he struck the old trail again.

He rode hard all morning and halted in a shady spot to rest and graze his horse. In the afternoon he took to the trail at an easy trot. The country grew wilder. Bald, rugged mountains broke the level of the monotonous horizon. About three in the afternoon he came to a little river which marked the boundary line of his hunting territory.

He made the decision to travel upstream for a while. The river was high with quicksand bars on each side, and he felt reluctant to cross into that region where his presence alone meant that he was a marked man. The bottomlands through which the river wound to the southwest were more inviting than the barrens he had traversed. The rest of that day he rode leisurely. At sunset he penetrated the brakes of willow and cottonwood to spend the night.

It seemed to him that in this lonely cover he would feel easy and content. But he did not. Every feeling, every imagining he had experienced the previous night returned more vividly and accentuated by newer ones of the same intensity and color.

In this kind of travel and camping he spent three more days, during which he crossed a number of trails, and one road where cattle—stolen cattle, probably—had recently passed. This time exhausted his supply of food, except salt, pepper, coffee, and sugar, of which he had a quantity. There were deer in the brakes, but as he could not get close enough to kill them with a revolver he had to satisfy himself with a rabbit.

Somewhere up this river there was a village called Huntsville. It was about a hundred miles from Wellston, and had a reputation throughout south-western Texas such that honest travelers gave the town a wide berth. Duane had considerable money in his possession, and he concluded to visit Huntsville, if he could find it, and buy a stock of provisions.

The following day, toward evening, he happened upon a road which he believed might lead to the village. There were a good many fresh horse tracks in the sand. He followed the road, proceeding cautiously. He had not gone very far when the sound of rapid hoofbeats caught his ear. They came from his rear. In the darkening twilight he could not see any great distance back along the road. Voices, however, warned him that these riders, whoever they were, had approached closer than he liked.

He turned a little way in among the mesquites and halted.

The horsemen were fast approaching. Presently they were abreast of Duane's position, so near that he could hear the creak of saddles, the clink of spurs.

"Shore he crossed the river below," said one man.

"I reckon you're right, Bill. He's slipped us," replied another.

Rangers or a posse of ranchers in pursuit of a fugitive! Certainly they could not be hunting him, but the feeling their proximity gave him was identical to what it would have been had he been this particular hunted man. He held his breath; he clenched his teeth; he pressed a quieting

hand upon his horse. Suddenly he became aware that these horsemen had halted. They were whispering. He could just make out a dark group closely massed.

"You're wrong, Bill," said a man in a low but distinct voice. "The idee of hearin' a hoss heave! You're wuss'n a ranger. An' you're hell-bent on killin' that rustler. Now I say let's go home an' eat."

"Wal, I'll just take a look at the sand," replied the man called Bill.

Duane heard the clink of spurs on steel stirrup and the thud of boots on the ground. There followed a short silence which was broken by a sharply breathed exclamation.

Duane waited for no more. They had found his trail. He spurred his horse straight into the brush. At the second crashing bound there came yells from the road, and then shots. Duane heard the hiss of a bullet close by his ear, and as it struck a branch it made a peculiar singing sound. These shots and the proximity of that lead missile roused in Duane a quick, hot resentment. He must escape, yet it seemed that he did not care whether he did or not. Something grim kept urging him to halt and return the fire of these men.

After running a couple of hundred yards he raised himself from over the pommel, where he had tried to avoid the stinging branches, and tried to guide his horse. In the dark shadows under the mesquites and cottonwoods he was hard put to it to find open passage; however, he succeeded so well and made such little noise that gradually he drew away from his pursuers. The sound of their horses crashing through the thickets died away.

Duane reined in and listened. He had distanced them. Probably they would go into camp till daylight, then follow his tracks. He started on again, walking his horse, and peered sharply at the ground, so that he might take advantage of the first trail he crossed. It seemed a long while until he came upon one. He followed it until a late hour, when, striking the willow brakes again and hence the neighborhood of the river, he picketed his horse and lay down to rest.

Every moment he expected the chill, the sense of loneliness, the peculiarly imagined lights and shades of the night—these things that presaged the coming of Cal Bain. Doggedly Duane fought against the insidious phantom. He kept telling himself that it was just imagination, that it would wear off in time. Still in his heart he did not believe what he hoped.

Gray dawn found him in the saddle again, headed for the river. Half an hour of riding brought him to the dense thickets. These he threaded to come at length to the ford. It was a gravel bottom, and therefore an easy crossing. Once upon the opposite shore he reined in his horse and looked back. This action marked his acknowledgment of his situation; he had voluntarily sought the refuge of the outlaws; he was beyond the pale. A bitter curse passed his lips as he spurred his horse into the brakes on that alien shore.

He rode perhaps twenty miles, not sparing his horse nor caring whether or not he left a plain trail. "Let them hunt me!" he muttered.

When the heat of the day began to be oppressive, and hunger and thirst made themselves manifest, Duane began to look about him for a place to halt for the noon hour. The trail led into a road which was hard-packed and smooth from the tracks of cattle. He doubted not that he had come across one of the roads used by border raiders. He headed into it, and had scarcely traveled a mile when, turning a curve, he

came point-blank upon a single horseman riding toward him. Both riders wheeled their mounts sharply and were ready to run and shoot back. Not more than a hundred paces separated them. They stood then for a moment watching each other.

"Mawnin', stranger," called the man, dropping his hand from his hip.

"Howdy," replied Duane shortly.

They rode toward each other, closing half the gap, then they halted again.

"I seen you ain't no ranger," called the rider, "an' shore I ain't none." He laughed loudly, as if he had made a joke.

"How'd you know I wasn't a ranger?" asked Duane curiously.

"Wal," said the fellow, starting his horse forward at a walk, "a ranger'd never git ready to run the other way from one man." He laughed again. He was small and wiry, slouchy of attire, and armed to the teeth, and he bestrode a fine bay horse. He had quick, dancing brown eyes, at once frank and bold, and a coarse, bronzed face.

Duane acknowledged the truth of the assertion, and turned over in his mind how shrewdly the fellow had guessed him to be a hunted man.

"My name's Luke Stevens, an' I hail from the river. Who are you?" said this stranger.

Duane was silent.

"I reckon you're Buck Duane," went on Stevens. "I heerd you was a damn bad man with a gun."

Duane laughed, not at the doubtful compliment, but at the idea that the first outlaw he met should know him. Here was proof of how swiftly facts about gunplay traveled on the Texas border.

"Wal, Buck," said Stevens in a friendly manner, "I ain't presumin' on your time or company. I see you're headin' fer the river. But will you stop long enough to stake a feller to a bite of grub?"

"I'm out of grub, and pretty hungry myself," admitted Duane.

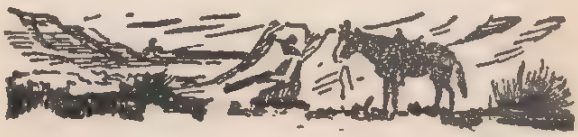
"Been pushin' your hoss, I see. Wal, I reckon you'd better stock up before you hit thet stretch of country." He made a wide sweep of his right arm, indicating the southwest.

"Stock up?" queried Duane thoughtfully.

"Shore. A feller has jest got to eat. I can rustle along without whisky, but not without grub. Thet's what makes it so embarrassin' travelin' these parts dodgin' your shadow. Now, I'm on my way to Mercer. It's a little two-bit town up the river a ways. I'm going to pack out some grub."

Stevens's tone was inviting. Duane kept silence, however, and then Stevens went on.

"Stranger, in this here country two's a crowd. It's safer. I never was much on this lone-wolf dodgin', though I've done it of necessity. It takes a damn good man to travel alone any length of time. Why, I've been thet sick I was jest achin' fer some ranger to come along an' plug me. Give me a pardner any day. Now, mebbe, you're not thet kind of a feller, an' I'm shore not presumin' to ask. But I jest declares myself sufficient."



"You mean you'd like me to go with you?" asked Duane.

Stevens grinned. "Wal, I should smile. I'd be particular proud to be braced with a man of your reputation."

"See here, that's all nonsense," declared Duane in some haste.

"Shore I think modesty becomin' to a youngster," replied Stevens. "I hate a brag. Buck, I don't know much about you. But every man who's lived along the Texas border remembers a lot about your dad. It was expected of you, I reckon, an' much of your rep was established before you throwed your gun. I jest heerd thet you was lightnin' on the draw, an' when you cut loose with a gun, why the figger on the ace of spades would cover your cluster of bullet holes. Thet's the word thet's gone down the border. It's the kind of reputation most sure to fly far an' swift ahead of a man in this country. An' the safest, too; I'll gamble on thet."

"Now, Buck, I'm not a spring chicken, an' I've been long on the dodge. Mebbe a little of my society won't hurt you none. You'll need to learn the country."

"I dare say you're right," replied Duane quietly, "and I'll go to Mercer with you."

Next moment he was riding down the road with Stevens. Duane had never been much of a talker, and now he found speech difficult. But his companion did not seem to mind that. He was a jocose, voluble fellow, probably glad now to hear the sound of his own voice.

Chapter Three

Rifle Shots

LATE that day, a couple of hours before sunset, Duane and Stevens, having rested their horses in the shade of some mesquites near the town of Mercer, saddled up and prepared to move.

"Buck, as we're lookin' fer grub, an' not trouble, I reckon you'd better hang up out here," Stevens was saying, as he mounted. "You see, towns an' sheriffs an' rangers are always lookin' fer new fellers gone bad. They sort of forget most of the old boys, except those as are plumb bad. Now, nobody in Mercer will take notice of me. Reckon there's been a thousand men run into the river country to become outlaws since yours truly. You jest wait here an' be ready to ride hard. Mebbe my besettin' sin will go operatin' in spite of my good intentions. In which case there'll be——"

His pause was significant. He grinned, and his brown eyes danced with a kind of wild humor.

"Stevens, have you got any money?" asked Duane.

"Money!" exclaimed Luke blankly. "Say, I haven't owned a two-bit piece since—wal, fer some time."

"I'll furnish money for grub," returned Duane. "And for whisky, too, providing you hurry back here—without making trouble."

"Shore you're a downright good pard," declared Stevens in admiration as he took the money. "I give my word, Buck, an' I'm here to say I never broke it yet. Lay low, an' look fer me back quick."

With that he spurred his horse and rode out of the mesquites toward the town. At that distance, about a quarter of a mile, Mercer appeared to be a cluster of low adobe houses set in a grove of cottonwoods. Pastures of alfalfa were dotted by horses and cattle. Duane saw a sheepherder driving in a meager flock.

Presently Stevens rode out of sight into the town. Duane waited, hoping the outlaw would make good his word. Probably not a quarter of an hour had elapsed when Duane heard the clear reports of a Winchester

rifle, the clatter of rapid hoofbeats, and yells unmistakably the kind to mean danger for a man like Stevens. Duane mounted and rode to the edge of the mesquites.

He saw a cloud of dust down the road and a bay horse running fast. Stevens apparently had not been wounded by any of the shots, for he had a steady seat in his saddle. He carried a large pack over the pommel, and he kept looking back. The shots had ceased, but the yells increased.

Duane saw several men running and waving their arms. Then he spurred his horse and got into a swift stride, so Stevens would not pass him. Presently the outlaw caught up with him. Stevens was grinning, but there was now no fun in the dancing eyes—it was a devil that danced in them. His face seemed a shade paler.

"Was jest comin' out of the store," yelled Stevens. "Run plumb into a rancher —who knowed me. He opened up with a rifle. Think they'll chase us."

They covered several miles before there were any signs of pursuit, and when horsemen did move into sight out of the cottonwoods Duane and his companion steadily drew farther away.

"No hosses in thet bunch to worry us," called out Stevens.

Duane had the same conviction, and he did not look back again. At sunset they reached the willow brakes and the river. Duane's horse was winded and lashed with sweat and lather. It was not until the crossing had been accomplished that Duane halted to rest his animal.

Stevens was riding up the low, sandy bank. He reeled in the saddle. With an exclamation of surprise Duane leaped off and ran to the outlaw's side.

Stevens was pale, and his face bore beads of sweat. The whole front of his shirt was soaked with blood.

"You're shot!" cried Duane.

"Wal, who'n hell said I wasn't? Would you mind givin' me a lift—on this here pack?"

Duane lifted the heavy pack down and then helped Stevens to dismount. The outlaw had a bloody foam on his lips.

"Oh, why didn't you *say* so!" cried Duane. "I never thought. You seemed all right."

"Wal, Luke Stevens may be as gabby as an old woman, but sometimes he doesn't say anythin'. It wouldn't have done no good."

Duane bade him sit down, removed his shirt, and washed the blood from his breast and back. Stevens had been shot in the breast, fairly low down, and the bullet had gone clear through him. His ride, holding himself and that heavy pack in the saddle, had been a feat little short of marvelous. Duane did not see how it had been possible, and he felt no hope for the outlaw. But he plugged the wounds and bound them tightly.

"Feller's name was Brown," Stevens said. "Me an' him fell out over a hoss I stole from him over in Huntsville. We had a shootin'-scrape then. Wal, as I was straddlin' my hoss back there in Mercer I seen this Brown, an' seen him before he seen me. Could have killed him, too. But I wasn't breakin' my word to you. I kind of hoped he wouldn't spot me. But he did —an' fust shot he got me here. What do you think of this hole?"

"It's pretty bad," replied Duane.

"I reckon it is. Wal, I've had some bad wounds I lived over. Guess mebbe I can stand this one. Now, Buck, get me some place in the brakes, leave me some grub an' water at my hand, an' then you clear out."

"Leave you here alone?" asked Duane sharply.

"Shore. You see, I can't keep up with you. Brown an' his friends will foller us acrost the river a ways. You've got to think of number one in this game."

"What would you do in my case?" asked Duane curiously.

"Wal, I reckon I'd clear out an' save my hide," replied Stevens.

Duane felt inclined to doubt the outlaw's assertion. For his own part he decided his conduct without further speech. First he watered the horses, filled canteens and water bag, and then tied the pack upon his own horse. That done, he lifted Stevens upon his horse, and, holding him in the saddle, turned into the brakes, being careful to pick out hard or grassy ground that left little signs of tracks. Just about dark he ran across a trail that Stevens said was a good one to take into the wild country.

"Reckon we'd better keep right on in the dark—till I drop," concluded Stevens with a laugh.

All that night Duane, gloomy and thoughtful, attentive to the wounded outlaw, walked the trail and never halted till daybreak. He was tired then and very hungry. Stevens seemed in bad shape, although he was still spirited and cheerful. Duane made camp. The outlaw refused food, but asked for both whisky and water. Then he stretched out.

"Buck, will you take off my boots?" he asked, a faint smile on his pallid face.

Duane removed them, wondering if the outlaw had the thought that he did not want to die with his boots on. Stevens seemed to read his mind.

"Buck, my old daddy used to say thet I was born to be hanged. But I wasn't—an' dyin' with your boots on is the next wust way to croak."

"You've a chance to—to get over this," said Duane.

"Shore. But I want to be correct about the boots—an' say, pard, if I do go over, jest you remember thet I was appreciatin' of your kindness."

Then he closed his eyes and seemed to sleep.

Duane could not find water for the horses, but there was an abundance of dew-wet grass upon which he hobbled them. After that was done he prepared himself a much-needed meal. The sun was getting warm when he lay down to sleep, and when he awoke it was sinking in the west. Stevens was still alive, for he breathed heavily. Duane listened awhile, then rose and went for the horses.

When he returned with them he found Stevens awake, bright-eyed, cheerful as usual, and apparently stronger.

"Wal, Buck, I'm still with you an' good fer another night's ride," he said. "Guess about all I need now is a big pull on thet bottle. Help me, will you? There! thet was bully. I ain't swallowin' my blood this evenin'. Mebbe I've bled all there was in me."

While Duane got a hurried meal for himself, packed up the little outfit, and saddled the horses, Stevens kept on talking. He seemed to be in a hurry to tell Duane all about the country. Another night ride would put them beyond fear of pursuit, within striking distance of the Rio Grande and the hiding-places of the outlaws.

When it came time for mounting the horses Stevens said, "Reckon you can pull on my boots once more." In spite of the laugh accompanying the words Duane detected a subtle change in the outlaw's spirit.

On this night travel was facilitated by the fact that the trail was broad enough for

two horses abreast, enabling Duane to ride while upholding Stevens in the saddle.

The difficulty most persistent was in keeping the horses in a walk. They were used to a trot, and that kind of gait would not do for Stevens. The red died out of the west; a pale after-glow prevailed for a while; darkness set in. After a while Stevens ceased talking and drooped in his saddle. Duane kept the horses going, however, and the slow hours wore away. At length a grayness blotted out the stars and mantled the level of mesquite and cactus.

Dawn caught the fugitives at a green camping-site on the bank of a rocky little stream. Stevens fell a dead weight into Duane's arms, and one look at the haggard face showed Duane that the outlaw had taken his last ride. He knew it, too. Yet that cheerfulness prevailed.

"Buck, my feet are orful tired packin' them heavy boots," he said, and seemed immensely relieved when Duane had removed them.

Duane made Stevens as comfortable as possible, then attended to his own needs. And the outlaw took up the thread of his conversation where he had left off the night before.

"This trail splits up a ways from here, an' every branch of it leads to a hole where you'll find men—a few, mebbe, like yourself—some like me—an' gangs of no-good hoss thieves, rustlers, an' such. It's easy livin', Buck. I reckon, though, that you'll not find it easy. You'll never mix in. You'll be a lone wolf. I seen that right off. Wal, if a man can stand the loneliness, an' if he's quick on the draw, mebbe lone-wolfin' it is the best. Shore I don't know. But these fellers in here will be suspicious of a man who goes in alone. If they get a chance they'll kill you."

"Be quiet," said Duane. "Talking uses up your strength."

"Aw, I'll talk till—I'm done," he replied doggedly. "See here, pard, you can gamble on what I'm tellin' you. An' it'll be useful. From this camp we'll—you'll meet men right along. An' none of them will be honest men. All the same, some are better'n others. I lived along the river fer twelve years. There's three big gangs of outlaws. King Fisher—you know him, I reckon, fer he's half the time livin' among respectable folks. King is a pretty good feller. It'll do to tie up with him an' his gang. Now, there's Cheseldine, who hangs out in the Rim Rock way up the river. I never seen him, though I stayed once right in his camp. Late years he's got rich an' keeps back pretty well hid. But Bland—I knowed Bland fer years. An' I haven't any use fer him. Bland has the biggest gang. You ain't likely to miss strikin' his place some time or other. He's got a regular town, I might say. Shore there's gamblin' an' gun-fightin' goin' on at Bland's camp all the time. Bland has killed some twenty men, an' thet's not countin' greasers."

Here Stevens took another drink and then rested for a while.

"You ain't likely to get on with Bland," he then resumed presently. "You're too strappin' big an' good-lookin' to please the chief. Fer he's got women in his camp. Then he'd be jealous of your possibilities with a gun. I reckon any of the other gangs would be better fer you when you ain't goin' it alone."

Apparently that exhausted the fund of information and advice Stevens had been eager to impart. He lapsed into silence and lay with closed eyes. Duane dozed in a comfortable seat. By and by something roused him. Stevens was once more talking, but with a changed tone.

"Feller's name—was Brown," he rambled. "We fell out—over a hoss I stole from him—in Huntsville. He stole it fust. Brown's one of them sneaks—afraid of the open—he steals an' pretends to be honest. Say, Buck, mebbe you'll meet Brown some day—You an' me are pards now."

"I'll remember, if I ever meet him," said Duane.

That seemed to satisfy the outlaw. Presently he tried to lift his head, but had not the strength. A strange shade was creeping across the bronzed, rough face.

"My feet are pretty heavy. Shore you got my boots off?"

Duane held them up, but was not certain that Stevens could see them. The outlaw closed his eyes again and muttered incoherently. Then he fell asleep. Duane believed that sleep was final. The day passed. Toward sundown Stevens awoke, and his eyes seemed clearer. Duane went to get some fresh water. When he returned Stevens made no sign that he wanted anything. There was something bright about him, and suddenly Duane realized what it meant.

"Pard, you—stuck—to me!" the outlaw whispered.

Duane caught a hint of gladness in the voice; he traced a faint surprise in the haggard face. Stevens seemed like a little child.

To Duane the moment was sad, elemental, big with a burden of mystery he could not understand.

Duane buried him in a shallow arroyo and heaped up a pile of stones to mark the grave. That done, he saddled his comrade's horse, hung the weapons over the pommel; and, mounting his own steed, he rode down the trail in the gathering twilight.

Chapter Four

Bland's Hideaway

TWO days later, about the middle of the forenoon, Duane dragged the two horses up the last ascent of an exceedingly rough trail and found himself on top of the Rim Rock, with a beautiful green valley at his feet, the yellow, sluggish Rio Grande, shining in the sun, and the great, wild, mountainous barren of Mexico stretching to the south.

Duane had not fallen in with any travelers. He had taken the likeliest-looking trail he had come across. Where it had led him he had not the slightest idea, except that here was the river, and probably the valley was the retreat of outlaws.

No wonder outlaws were safe in that wild refuge! Duane had spent the last two days climbing the roughest and most difficult trail he had ever seen. From the looks of the descent he imagined the worst part of his travel was yet to come. Not improbably it was two thousand feet down to the river. The wedge-shaped valley, green with alfalfa and cottonwood, and nestling down amid the bare walls of yellow rock, was a delight and a relief to his tired eyes. Duane began the descent.

The trail proved to be the kind that could not be descended slowly. He kept dodging rocks which his horses loosed behind him. And in a short time he reached the valley, entering at the apex of the wedge. A stream of clear water tumbled out of the rocks here, and most of it ran into irrigation-ditches. His horses drank thirstily. He too drank, then mounted and rode

down the valley wondering what would be his reception.

The valley was much larger than it had appeared from the high elevation. Well watered, green with grass and tree, and evidently farmed by good hands, it gave Duane a considerable surprise. Horses and cattle were everywhere. Every clump of cottonwoods surrounded a small adobe house. Duane saw Mexicans working in the fields and horsemen going to and fro. Presently he passed a house bigger than the others with a porch attached. A woman, young and pretty, he thought, watched him from a door. No one else appeared to notice him.

Presently the trail widened into a road, and that into a kind of square lined by a number of adobe and log buildings of rudest structure. Within sight were horses, dogs, a couple of steers, Mexican women with children, and several men, all of whom appeared to be doing nothing. His advent created no interest until he rode up to the men, who were lolling in the shade of a house.

As Duane reined to a halt one of the loungers in the shade rose with a loud exclamation: "Bust me if thet ain't Luke's hoss!"

The others accorded their interest, if not assent, by rising to advance toward Duane.

"How about it, Euchre? Ain't thet Luke's bay?" queried the first man.

"Plain as your nose," replied the fellow called Euchre.

"There ain't no doubt about thet, then," laughed another, "fer Bosomer's nose is shore plain on the landscape."

These men lined up before Duane, and as he coolly regarded them he thought they could have been recognized anywhere as desperadoes. The man called Bosomer, who had stepped forward, had a forbidding face which showed yellow eyes, an enormous nose, and a skin the color of dust, with a thatch of sandy hair.

"Stranger, who are you an' where in hell did you git thet bay hoss?" he demanded. His yellow eyes turned their glinting, hard light upward to Duane.

Duane remained silent. At least half his mind seemed busy with curious interest in regard to something that leaped inside him and made his breast feel tight. He recognized it as that strange emotion which had decided him to go out to the meeting with Bain—only now it was different, more powerful.

"Stranger, who are you?" asked another man, somewhat more civilly.

"My name's Duane."

"An' how'd you come by the hoss?"

Duane answered briefly, and his words were followed by a short silence, during which the men looked at him. Bosomer began to twist the ends of his beard.

"Reckon he's dead, all right, or nobody'd hev his hoss an' guns," presently said Euchre.

"Mister Duane," began Bosomer in low, stinging tones, "I happen to be Luke Stevens's side-pardner."

Duane looked him over, from dusty, worn-out boots to his slouchy sombrero. That look seemed to inflame Bosomer.

"An' I want the hoss an' them guns," he shouted.

"You or anybody else can have them, for all I care. I just fetched them in. But the pack is mine, replied Duane. "And" say, I befriended your pard. If you can't use a civil tongue you'd better cinch it."

"Civil? Haw, haw!" rejoined the outlaw. "I don't know you. How do we know you didn't plug Stevens, an' stole his hoss, an' jest happened to stumble down here?"

"You'll have to take my word, that's all," replied Duane sharply.

"—— ——! I ain't takin' your word! Savvy thet? An' I was Luke's pard!"

With that Bosomer wheeled and, pushing his companions aside, he stamped into the building, where his voice broke out in a roar.

Duane dismounted and threw his bridle.

"Stranger, Bosomer is shore hot-headed," said the man Euchre.

At this juncture several more outlaws crowded out of the door, and the one in the lead was a tall man of stalwart physique. His manner proclaimed him a leader. He had a long face, a flaming red beard, and clear, cold blue eyes that fixed a close scrutiny upon Duane.

"I'm Bland," he said authoritatively. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

This outlaw chief appeared to be reasonable, if he was not courteous. Duane told his story again, this time a little more in detail.

"I believe you," replied Bland at once. "Think I know when a fellow is lying."

"I reckon you're on the right trail," put in Euchre. "Thet about Luke wantin' his boots took off—thet satisfies me. Luke hed a mortal dread of dyin' with his boots on."

"You said Duane—Buck Duane?" queried Bland. "Are you a son of that Duane who was a gun-fighter some years back?"

"Yes," replied Duane.

"Never met him, and glad I didn't," said Bland with a grim humor. "So you got in trouble and had to go on the dodge? What kind of trouble?"

"Had a fight."

"Fight? Do you mean gunplay?"

"Yes, it ended in gunplay, I'm sorry to say," answered Duane.

"Guess I needn't ask the son of Duane if he killed his man," went on Bland ironically. "Well, I'm sorry you bucked against trouble in my camp. But as it is, I guess you'd be wise to make yourself scarce."

"Do you mean I'm politely told to move on?" asked Duane quietly.

"Not exactly that," said Bland, as if irritated. "If this isn't a free place there isn't one on earth. Every man is equal here. Do you want to join my band?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, even if you did I imagine that wouldn't stop Bosomer. He's an ugly fellow. He's one of the few gunmen I've met who wants to kill somebody all the time. Merely for your own sake I advise you to hit the trail."

"Thanks. But if that's all I'll stay," returned Duane. Even as he spoke he felt that he did not know himself.

Bosomer appeared at the door, pushing men who tried to detain him, and as he jumped clear of a last reaching hand he uttered a snarl like an angry dog. Manifestly the short while he had spent inside had been devoted to drinking and talking himself into a frenzy. Bland and the other outlaws quickly moved aside, letting Duane stand alone. When Bosomer saw Duane standing motionless and watchful a strange change passed quickly in him. He halted in his tracks, and as he did that the men who had followed him out piled over one another in their hurry to get to one side.

Duane felt like iron, and yet thrill after thrill ran through him. It was almost as if this situation had been one long familiar to him. Somehow he understood this yellow-eyed Bosomer. The outlaw

had come out to kill him. And now, though somewhat checked by the stand of a stranger, he still meant to kill. Duane divined that no sudden animosity was driving Bosomer. It was just his chance. In that moment murder would have been joy to him. Very likely he had forgotten his pretext for a quarrel. Very probably his faculties were absorbed in conjecture as to Duane's possibilities.

But he did not speak a word. He remained motionless for a long moment, his eyes pale and steady, his right hand like a claw.

That instant gave Duane a power to read in his enemy's eyes the thought that preceded action. But Duane did not want to kill another man. Still he would have to fight, and he decided to cripple Bosomer. When Bosomer's hand moved Duane's gun was spouting fire. Two shots only—both from Duane's gun—and the outlaw fell with his right arm shattered. Bosomer cursed harshly and floundered in the dust, trying to reach the gun with his left hand. His comrades, however, seeing that Duane would not kill unless forced, closed in upon Bosomer and prevented any further madness on his part.

Chapter Five

Bandits' Night Life

OF the outlaws present Euchre appeared to be the one most inclined to add friendliness to curiosity; and he led Duane and the horses away to a small adobe shack. He tied the horses in an open shed and removed their saddles. Then, gathering up Stevens's weapons, he invited his visitor to enter the house.

It had two rooms—windows without coverings—bare floors. One room contained blankets, weapons, saddles, and bridles; the other a stone fireplace, rude table and bench, two bunks, a box cupboard, and various blackened utensils.

"Make yourself to home as long as you want to stay," said Euchre. "I ain't rich in this world's goods, but I own what's here, an' you're welcome."

"Thanks. I'll stay awhile and rest. I'm pretty well played out," replied Duane.

"Go ahead an' rest. I'll take your horses to grass."

Euchre left Duane alone in the house. Duane relaxed then, and mechanically he wiped the sweat from his face. He took off his coat and belt and made himself comfortable on the blankets. He felt glad when Euchre came bustling in, and for the first time he took notice of the outlaw.

Euchre was old in years. What little hair he had was gray, his face clean-shaven and full of wrinkles; his eyes were half-shut from long gazing through the sun and dust. He stooped. But his thin frame denoted strength and endurance still unimpaired.

"Hev a drink or a smoke?" he asked.

Duane shook his head. He had not been unfamiliar with whisky, and he had used tobacco moderately since he was sixteen. But now, strangely, he felt a disgust at the idea of stimulants.

Euchre wagged his old head sympathetically. "Reckon you feel a little sick. When it comes to shootin' I run. What's your age?"

"I'm twenty-three," replied Duane.

Euchre showed surprise. "You're only a boy! I thought you thirty anyways. Buck,

I heard what you told Bland, an' puttin' thet with my own figgerin', I reckon you're no criminal yet. Throwin' a gun in self-defense—thet ain't no crime!"

Duane, finding relief in talking, told more about himself.

"Huh," replied the old man. "I've been on this river for years, an' I've seen hundreds of boys come in on the dodge. Most of them, though, was no good. An' thet kind don't last long. This river country has been an' is the refuge fer criminals from all over the states. The gang Bland rules here come from all over, an' they're tough cusses, you can bet on thet. They live fat an' easy. If it wasn't fer the fightin' among themselves they'd shore grow populous. The Rim Rock is no place for a peaceable, decent feller. I heard you tell Bland you wouldn't join his gang. Thet'll not make him take a likin' to you. Have you any money?"

"Not much," replied Duane.

"Could you live by gamblin'? Are you good at cards?"

"No."

"You wouldn't steal hosses or rustle cattle?"

"No."

"When your money's gone how'n hell will you live? There ain't any work a decent feller could do. You can't herd with greasers. Why, Bland's men would shoot at you in the fields. What'll you do, son?"

"God knows," replied Duane hopelessly. "I'll make my money last as long as possible—then starve."

"Wal, I'm pretty pore, but you'll never starve while I got anythin'."

Here it struck Duane again—that something human and kind which he had seen in Stevens. Duane's estimate of outlaws had lacked this quality. He had not accorded them any virtues. To him, as to the whole world, they had been merely vicious men without one redeeming feature.

"I'm much obliged to you, Euchre," replied Duane. "But of course I won't live with any one unless I can pay my share."

"Have it any way you like, my son," said Euchre, good-humoredly. "You make a fire, an' I'll set about gettin' grub. I'm a sour-dough, Buck. Thet man doesn't live who can beat my bread."

"How do you ever pack supplies in here?" asked Duane.

"Some comes across from Mexico, an' the rest down the river. Thet river trip is a bird. It's more'n five hundred miles to any supply point. Bland has *mozos*, greaser boatmen. Sometimes, too, he gets supplies in from down-river. You see, Bland sells thousands of cattle in Cuba. An' all this stock has to go down by boat to meet the ships."

"Where on earth are the cattle driven down to the river?" asked Duane.

"Thet's not my secret," replied Euchre shortly. "Fact is, I don't know. I've rustled cattle for Bland, but he never sent me through the Rim Rock with them."

Duane was curious about Bland and his gang, and glad to have something to think about. He wanted to forget. In the next hour he did forget, and enjoyed helping in the preparation and eating of the meal. Euchre, after washing and hanging up the several utensils, put on his hat and turned to go out.

"Come along or stay here, as you want," he said to Duane.

"I'll stay," rejoined Duane slowly.

The old outlaw left the room and trudged away, whistling cheerfully.

Duane looked around him for a book

or paper, anything to read; but all the printed matter he could find consisted of a few words on cartridge boxes and an advertisement on the back of a tobacco pouch. He began to walk to and fro, from one end of the room to the other. And as he walked he fell into the lately acquired habit of brooding over his misfortune.

Suddenly he straightened up with a jerk. Unconsciously he had drawn his gun. Standing there with the bright cold weapon in his hand, he looked at it in consternation. How had he come to draw it? He was amazed to find that, bitter as he had grown at fate, the desire to live burned strong in him. Life certainly held no bright prospects for him. Already he had begun to despair of ever getting back to his home. But to give up like a white-hearted coward, to let himself be handcuffed and jailed, to run from a drunken, bragging cowboy, or be shot in cold blood by some border brute who merely wanted to add another notch to his gun—these things were impossible for Duane because there was in him the temper to fight.

In that hour he yielded only to fate and the spirit inborn in him. Hereafter this gun must be a living part of him. Right then and there he returned to a practice he had long discontinued—the draw. It was now a stern, bitter, deadly business with him. He did not need to fire the gun, for accuracy was a gift and had become assured. He stood still in his tracks; he paced the room; he sat down, lay down, put himself in awkward positions; and from every position he practiced throwing his gun— practiced it till he was hot and tired and his arm ached and his hand burned.

Later he went outdoors to the cooler shade of the cottonwoods. From this point he could see a good deal of the valley. Under different circumstances Duane felt that he would have enjoyed such a beautiful spot. Euchre's shack sat against the first rise of the slope of the wall, and Duane, by climbing a few rods, got a view of the whole valley. Assuredly it was an outlaw settlement. He saw a good many Mexicans, who, of course, were hand and glove with Bland. Also he saw enormous flat-boats, crude of structure, moored along the banks of the river. The Rio Grande rolled away between high bluffs. A cable, sagging deep in the middle, was stretched over the wide yellow stream, and an old scow, evidently used as a ferry, lay anchored on the far shore.

The valley was an ideal retreat for an outlaw band operating on a big scale. Pursuit scarcely need be feared over the broken trails of the Rim Rock. And the open end of the valley could be defended against almost any number of men coming down the river. Access to Mexico was easy and quick. What puzzled Duane was how Bland got cattle down to the river, and he wondered if the rustler really did get rid of his stolen stock by use of boats.

Duane must have idled away considerable time up on the hill, for when he returned to the shack Euchre was busily engaged around the camp fire.

"Wal, glad to see you ain't so pale about the gills as you was," he said by way of greeting. "Pitch in an' we'll soon have grub ready. There's shore one consolin' fact round this here camp."

"What's that?" asked Duane.

"Plenty of good juicy beef to eat. An' it doesn't cost a short bit."

"But it costs hard rides and trouble, bad conscience, and life, too, doesn't it?"

"I ain't shore about the bad conscience,

Mine never bothered me none. An' as for life, why, thet's cheap in Texas."

"Who is Bland?" asked Duane, quickly changing the subject. "What do you know about him?"

"We don't know who he is or where he hails from," replied Euchre. "He must have been a young man when he struck Texas. Now he's middle-aged. I remember how years ago he was soft-spoken an' not rough in talk or act like he is now. Bland knows a lot. He can doctor you, an' he's shore a knowin' feller with tools. He's the kind thet rules men. Outlaws are always ridin' in here to join his gang, an' if it hadn't been fer the gamblin' an' gunplay he'd have a thousand men around him."

"How many in his gang now?"

"I reckon there's short of a hundred now. Then Bland has several small camps up an' down the river. Also he has men back on the cattle ranges."

"How does he control such a big force?" asked Duane. "Luke Stevens said he had no use for Bland. And I heard once somewhere that Bland was a devil."

"Thet's it. He is a devil. He's hard as flint, violent in temper, never made friends except his right-hand men, Dave Rugg an' Chess Alloway. Bland'll shoot at a wink. He's killed a lot of fellers, an' some fer nothin'. The reason thet outlaws gather round him an' stick is because he's a safe refuge, an' then he's well heeled. Bland is free with money. He gambles when he's not off with a shipment of cattle. He throws money around. An' the fact is there's always plenty of money where he is. Thet's what holds the gang. Dirty, bloody money!"

"It's a wonder he hasn't been killed —all these years on the border!"

"Wal," replied Euchre dryly, "he's been quicker on the draw than the other fellers who hankered to kill him, that's all."

Euchre's reply rather chilled Duane's interest for the moment. Such remarks always made his mind revolve round facts pertaining to himself.

"Speakin' of this here swift-wrist game," went on Euchre, "there's been considerable talk in camp about your throwin' of a gun. You know, Buck, thet among us hunted men there ain't anythin' calculated to rouse respect like a slick hand with a gun. I heard Bland say this afternoon thet he'd never seen your equal. He was watchin' of you close, he said, an' just couldn't follow your hand when you drawed. All the fellers who seen you meet Bosomer had somethin' to say. Bo was about as handy with a gun as any man in this camp, barrin' Chess Alloway an' mebbe Bland himself. Chess is the captain with a Colt—or he was. An' he shore didn't like the references made about your speed. Bland was honest in acknowledgin' it, but he didn't like it, neither.

"Some of the fellers allowed your draw might have been just accident. But most of them figgered different. An' they all shut up when Bland told who an' what your dad was. 'Pears to me I once seen your dad in a gun-scrape over at Santone, years ago. Wal, I says, 'What ails you locoed gents? Did young Duane budge an inch when Bo came roarin' out, blood in his eye? Wasn't he cool an' quiet, an' weren't his eyes readin' Bo's mind? An' thet lightnin' draw—can't you-all see thet's a family gift?' "

Euchre's narrow eyes twinkled, and he gave the dough he was rolling a slap with his flour-whitened hand. Manifestly he had proclaimed himself a champion

and partner of Duane's, with all the pride an old man could feel in a young one whom he admired.

"Wal," he resumed presently, "thet's your introduction to the border, Buck. An' your card was a high trump. You'll be let severely alone by real gun-fighters an' men like Bland, Alloway, Rugg, an' the bosses of the other gangs. After all, these real men *are* men, you know, an' onless you cross them they're no more likely to interfere with you than you are with them. But there's a sight of fellers like Bosomer in the river country. They'll all want your game. An' every town you ride into will scare up some cowpuncher full of booze or a long-haired, four-flush gunman or a sheriff—an' these men will be playin' to the crowd an' yellin' for your blood. Thet's the Texas of it. You'll have to hide fer ever in the brakes or you'll have to *kill* such men. Buck, this ain't cheerful news—I'm only tellin' you because I've taken a likin' to you, an' you ain't border-wise. Let's eat now, an' afterwards we'll go out so the gang can see you're not hidin'."

When Duane went out with Euchre the sun was setting behind a blue range of mountains across the river in Mexico. The valley appeared to open to the southwest. Somewhere near at hand a woman was singing. And Duane saw a little Mexican boy driving home some cows, one of which wore a bell. The sweet, happy voice of a woman and a whistling barefoot boy—these seemed utterly out of place here.

Euchre presently led to the square and the row of rough houses Duane remembered. "Let's have a look in here."

Duane had to bend his head to enter the door. He found himself in a very large room inclosed by adobe walls and roofed with brush. It was full of rude benches, tables, seats. At one corner a number of kegs and barrels lay side by side in a rack. A Mexican boy was lighting lamps hung on posts that sustained the log rafters of the roof.

"The only feller who's goin' to put a close eye on you is Benson," said Euchre. "He runs the place an' sells drinks. The gang calls him Jackrabbit Benson, because he's always got his eye peeled an' his ear cocked. Don't notice him if he looks you over, Buck. Benson is scared to death of every newcomer who rustles into Bland's camp. An' the reason, I take it, is because he's done somebody dirt. He's hidin' from some guy who's huntin' him to kill him. Wal, I'm always expectin' to see some feller ride in here an' throw a gun on Benson. Can't say I'd be grieved."

Duane casually glanced in the direction indicated, and he saw a spare, gaunt man with a face strikingly white beside the red and bronze and dark skins of the men around him. It was a cadaverous face. The black mustache hung down; a heavy lock of black hair dropped down over the brow; deep-set, hollow, staring eyes looked out piercingly. The man had a restless, alert, nervous manner. He put his hands on the board that served as a bar and stared at Duane. But when he met Duane's glance he turned hurriedly to go on serving out liquor.

"What have you got against him?" inquired Duane, as he sat down beside Euchre.

"Wal, mebbe I'm cross-grained," replied Euchre apologetically. "Shore an outlaw an' rustler such as me can't be touchy. But I never stole nothin' but cattle from some rancher who never missed 'em anyway. Thet sneak Benson—he was

the means of puttin' a little girl in Bland's way."

"Girl?" queried Duane.

"Shore. Bland's great on women. I'll tell you about this girl when we get out of here. Some of the gang are goin' to be sociable, an' I can't talk about the chief."

During the ensuing half-hour a number of outlaws passed by Duane and Euchre, halted for a greeting or sat down for a moment. They were all gruff, loud-voiced. merry, and good-natured. Duane replied civilly and agreeably when he was personally addressed; but he refused all invitations to drink and gamble. Evidently he had been accepted, in a way, as one of their clan. No one made any hint of an allusion to his affair with Bosomer. Duane saw readily that Euchre was well liked. One outlaw borrowed money from him; another asked for tobacco.

By the time it was dark the big room was full of outlaws and Mexicans, most of whom were engaged at *monte*. These gamblers, especially the Mexicans, were intense and quiet. The noise in the place came from the drinkers, the loungers. Duane had seen gambling-resorts—some of the famous ones in San Antonio and El Paso, a few in border towns where license went unchecked. But this place of Jackrabbit Benson's impressed him as one where guns and knives were accessories to the game. To his eye the most prominent thing about the gamesters appeared to be their weapons. On several of the tables were piles of silver—Mexican *pesos*—as large and high as the crown of his hat. There were also piles of gold and silver in United States coin.

Betting was heavy and large sums exchanged hands. The Mexicans showed a sterner obsession, an intenser passion. Some of the Americans staked freely, nonchalantly: these latter were manifestly winning, for there were brother outlaws there who wagered coin with grudging, sullen, greedy eyes. Boisterous talk and laughter among the drinking men drowned, except at intervals, the low, brief talk of the gamblers. The clink of coin sounded incessantly; sometimes just low, steady musical rings; and again, when a pile was tumbled quickly, there was a silvery crash. Here an outlaw pounded on a table with the butt of his gun; there another noisily palmed a roll of dollars while he studied his opponent's face. The noises, however, in Benson's den did not contribute to any extent to the sinister aspect of the place. That seemed to come from the grim and reckless faces, from the bent, intent heads.

"Bland's not here tonight," Euchre was saying. "He left today on one of his trips, takin' Alloway an' some others. But his other man, Rugg, he's here. See him standin' with them three fellers, all close to Benson. Rugg's the little bow-legged man with the half of his face shot off. He's one-eyed. But he can shore see out of the one he's got. An' darn me! there's Hardin. You know him? He's got an outlaw gang as big as Bland's. Hardin is standin' next to Benson. See how quiet and unassumin' he looks. Do you see thet greaser there—the one with gold an' lace on his sombrero? Thet's Manuel, a Mexican bandit—comes here often to drop his coin. Next to him is Bill Marr—the feller with the bandana round his head. Bill rode in the other day with some fresh bullet holes. He's been shot more'n any feller I ever heard of. Funny, because Bill's no trouble-hunter, an', like me, he'd rather run than shoot. But he's the best rustler Bland's got—a grand rider, an' a wonder with cattle. An' see the

tow-headed youngster—thet's Kid Fuller, the kid of Bland's gang. Fuller has hit the pace hard, an' he won't last the year out on the border. He killed his sweetheart's father, got run out of Staceytown, took to stealin' hosses. An' next he's here with Bland."

Euchre went on calling Duane's attention to other men. Any one of them would have been a marked man in a respectable crowd. Here each took his place with more or less distinction, according to the record of his past wild prowess and his present possibilities.

Duane, realizing that he was tolerated there, received in careless friendly spirit by this class of outcasts, experienced a feeling of revulsion that amounted almost to horror. What had he in common with such ruffians? Then in a flash of memory came the painful proof—he was a criminal in sight of Texas law; he, too, was an outcast.

Euchre's heavy hand on his arm, brought him back to outside things. The hum of voices, the clink of coin, the loud laughter had ceased. There was a silence that manifestly had followed some unusual word or action sufficient to still the room. It was broken by a harsh curse and the scrape of a bench on the floor.

"You stacked the cards, you ——!"

"Say that twice," another voice replied, so different in its cool, ominous tone from the other.

"I'll say it twice," returned the first gamester in hot haste. "I'll say it three times. I'll whistle it. Are you deaf? You light-fingered gent—you stacked the cards!"

Silence ensued, deeper than before. Not an outlaw moved for a full moment. Then suddenly the room was full of disorder as men rose and ran and dived everywhere.

"Run or duck!" yelled Euchre, close to Duane's ear. With that he dashed for the door. Duane leaped after him. They ran into a jostling mob. Heavy gunshots and hoarse yells hurried the crowd Duane was with pell-mell out into the darkness. There they all halted, and several peeped in at the door.

"Who was the Kid callin'?" asked one outlaw.

"Bud Marsh," replied another.

"I reckon them fust shots was Bud's. *Adios*, Kid. It was comin' to him," went on yet another.

"How many shots?"

"Three or four, I counted."

"Three heavy an' one light. Thet light one was the Kid's .38. Listen! There's the Kid hollerin' now. He ain't cashed, anyway."

Most of the outlaws began to file back into the room. Duane started slowly down the walk. Presently Euchre caught up with him.

"Nobody hurt much, which's shore some strange," he said. "The Kid—young Fuller thet I was tellin you about—he was drinkin' an losin'. Lost his nut, too, callin' Bud Marsh thet way. Bud's as straight at cards as any of 'em. Somebody grabbed Bud, who shot into the roof. An' Fuller's arm was knocked up. He only hit a greaser."

Chapter Six

Kate Bland

NEXT morning Duane found that a moody and despondent spell had fastened on him. Wishing to be alone, he went out and walked a trail leading round the river bluff. After a while he made out that

the trouble was that he could not resign himself to his fate. He could not believe there was no hope. But what to do appeared beyond his power to tell.

Duane had intelligence enough to see his peril—the danger threatening his character as a man, just as much as that which threatened his life. He cared vastly more for what he considered honor and integrity than he did for life. He saw that it was bad for him to be alone. But, it appeared, lonely months and perhaps years inevitably must be his.

In the bright light of day he could not recall the state of mind that was his at twilight or dusk or in the dark night. By day these visitations became to him what they really were—phantoms of his conscience. He could dismiss the thought of them then. He could scarcely remember or believe that this strange feat of fancy or imagination had troubled him, pained him, made him sleepless and sick.

After an unhappy hour he determined to create interest in all that he came across and so forget himself as much as possible. He had an opportunity now to see just what the outlaw's life really was. He meant to be curious, sympathetic, clear-sighted.

When he returned to the shack Euchre was cooking dinner.

"Say, Buck, I've news for you," he said. "Feller named Bradley rode in this morning. Told about the ace of spades they put over the bullet holes in thet cowpuncher Bain you plugged. Then there was a rancher shot at a water hole twenty miles south of Wellstown. Reckon you didn't do it?"

"No, I certainly did not," replied Duane.

"Wal, you get the blame. It ain't nothin' fer a feller to be saddled with gunplays he never made. An', Buck, if you ever get famous, as seems likely, you'll be blamed fer many a crime. The border'll make an outlaw an' murderer out of you. Wal' thet's enough of thet. I've more news. You're goin' to be popular."

"Popular? What do you mean?"

"I met Bland's wife this mornin'. She seen you the other day when you rode in. She shore wants to meet you, an' so do some of the other women in camp. They always want to meet the new fellers who've just come in. It's lonesome for women here, an' they like to hear news from the towns."

"Well, Euchre, I don't want to be impolite, but I'd rather not meet any women," rejoined Duane.

"I was afraid you wouldn't. Don't blame you much. Women are hell. I was hopin', though, you might talk a little to thet poor lonesome kid."

"What kid?" inquired Duane in surprise.

"Didn't I tell you about Jennie—the girl Bland's holdin' here—the one Jackrabbit Benson had a hand in stealin'?"

"You mentioned a girl. That's all. Tell me now," replied Duane abruptly.

"Wal, I got it this way. Some years ago Benson made a trip over the river to buy mescal an' other drinks. He'll sneak over there once in a while. An' as I get it he runs across a gang of greasers with some gringo prisoners. I reckon there was some barterin', perhaps murderin'. Anyway, Benson fetched the girl back. She was more dead than alive. But it turned out she was only starved an' scared half to death. She hadn't been harmed. I reckon she was then about fourteen years old.

"Benson's idee, he said, was to use her in his den sellin' drinks an' the like,

But Bland seen the kid and took her—bought her from Benson. You can gamble Bland didn't do thet from notions of chivalry. I ain't gainsayin', however, but thet Jennie was better off with Kate Bland. She's been hard on Jennie, but she's kept Bland an' the other men from treatin' the kid shameful. Lately Jennie has growed into an all-fired pretty girl, an' Kate is powerful jealous of her.

"I can see hell brewin' over there in Bland's cabin. Thet's why I wish you'd come over with me. Bland's hardly ever home. His wife's invited you. Shore, if she gets sweet on you, as she has on—wal, thet'd complicate matters. But you'd get to see Jennie, an' mebbe you could help her. Mind, I ain't hintin' nothin'. I'm just wantin' to put her in your way. You're a man an' can think fer yourself. I had a baby girl once, an' if she'd lived she'd be as big as Jennie now, an' by Gawd, I wouldn't want her here in Bland's camp."

"I'll go, Euchre. Take me over," replied Duane.

In the afternoon Euchre set off with Duane, and soon they reached Bland's cabin. It was the same as the other adobe structures in the valley, but it was larger and pleasantly located rather high up in a grove of cottonwoods.

Euchre knocked upon the side of the door.

"Is that you, Euchre?" asked a girl's voice, low, hesitatingly. The tone of it, rather deep and with a note of fear, struck Duane. He wondered what she would be like.

"Yes, it's me, Jennie," answered Euchre. "Where's Mrs. Bland?"

"She went over to Deger's. There's somebody sick," replied the girl.

Euchre whispered something about luck to Duane. "Jennie, come out or let us in. Here's the young man I was tellin' you about," Euchre said.

"Oh, I can't! I look so—so—"

"Never mind how you look," interrupted the outlaw in a whisper. "It ain't no time to care fer thet. Here's young Duane. Jennie, he's no rustler, no thief. He's different. Come out, Jennie, an' mebbe he'll—"

The girl appeared in the doorway with downcast eyes and a stain of red in her white cheek. She had a pretty, sad face and bright hair.

"Don't be bashful, Jennie," said Euchre. "You an' Duane have a chance to talk a little. Now I'll go fetch Mrs. Bland, but I won't be hurryin'." With that Euchre went away through the cottonwoods.

"I'm glad to meet you, Miss—Miss Jennie," said Duane. "Euchre didn't mention your last name. He asked me to come over to—"

Duane's attempt at pleasantry halted short when Jennie lifted her lashes to look at him. Some kind of a shock went through Duane. Her gray eyes were beautiful, but it had not been beauty that cut short his speech. He seemed to see a tragic struggle between hope and doubt that shone in her piercing gaze. She kept looking, and Duane could not break the silence.

"What did you come here for?" she asked at last.

"To see you," replied Duane.

"Why?"

"Well—Euchre thought—he wanted me to talk to you, cheer you up a bit," replied Duane, somewhat lamely. The earnest eyes embarrassed him.

"Euchre's good. He's the only person in this awful place who's been good to

me. But he's afraid of Bland. He said you were different. Who are you?"

Duane told her.

"You're not a robber or rustler or murderer or some bad man come here to hide?"

"No, I'm not," replied Duane, trying to smile.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm on the dodge. You know what that means. I got in a shooting-scrape at home and had to run off. When it blows over I hope to go back."

"Oh, I know what these outlaws are. Yes, you're different." She kept the strained gaze upon him, but hope was kindling, and the hard lines of her youthful face were softening.

Something sweet and warm stirred deep in Duane as he realized the unfortunate girl was experiencing a birth of trust in him.

"Oh God! Maybe you're the man to save me—to take me away before it's too late!"

Duane's spirit leaped. "Maybe I am," he replied instantly.

She seemed to check a blind impulse to run into his arms. Her cheek flamed, her lips quivered, her bosom swelled under her ragged dress. Then the glow began to fade; doubt once more assailed her.

"It can't be. You're only—after me, too, like Bland—like all of them."

Duane's long arms went out and his hands clasped her shoulders. He shook her. "Look at me—straight in the eye. There are decent men. Haven't you a father—a brother?"

"They're dead—killed by raiders. We lived in Dimmit County. I was carried away," Jennie replied hurriedly. She put up an appealing hand to him. "Forgive me. I believe—I know you're good—I've almost forgotten what good men are like. Mister Duane, you'll help me?"

"Yes, Jennie, I will. Tell me how. What must I do? Have you any plan?"

"Oh, no—but take me away."

"I'll try," said Duane simply. "That won't be easy, though. I must have time to think. You must help me. There are many things to consider. Horses, food, trails, and then the best time to make the attempt. Are you watched—kept prisoner?"

"No. I could have run off lots of times. But I was afraid. I'd only have fallen into worse hands. Euchre has told me that. Mrs. Bland beats me, half starves me, but she has kept me from her husband and these other dogs. She hasn't done it for love of me, though. She always hated me, and lately she's growing jealous. There was a man came here by the name of Spence—so he called himself. He tried to be kind to me. But she wouldn't let him. She was in love with him.

"Bland finally shot Spence, and that ended that. She's been jealous ever since. I hear her fighting with Bland about me. She swears she'll kill me before he gets me. And Bland laughs in her face. Then I've heard Chess Alloway try to persuade Bland to give me to him. But Bland doesn't laugh then. Just lately before Bland went away things almost came to a head. I couldn't sleep. I wished Mrs. Bland would kill me. I'll certainly kill myself if they ruin me. Duane, you must be quick if you'd save me."

"I realize that," replied he thoughtfully. "I think my difficulty will be to fool Mrs. Bland. If she suspected me she'd have the whole gang of outlaws on me at once. What kind of a woman is she?"

"She's—she's brazen. I've heard her with her lovers. They get drunk sometimes when Bland's away. She's got a terribl

temper. She's vain. She likes flattery. Oh you could fool her easy enough if you'd lower yourself to—to—"

"To make love to her?" interrupted Duane. "I'd do worse than that to get you away from here."

"But—Duane," she faltered, "Bland will kill you."

Duane made no reply to this. He was trying to still a rising strange tumult in his breast. The old emotion—the rush of an instinct to kill! He turned cold all over.

"Chess Alloway will kill you if Bland doesn't," went on Jennie, with her tragic eyes on Duane's.

"Maybe he will," replied Duane, forcing a smile.

"Oh, better take me off at once," she said. "Save me without risking so much—without making love to Mrs. Bland!"

"Surely, if I can. There! I see Euchre coming with a woman."

"That's her. Oh, she mustn't see me with you."

"Wait—a moment," whispered Duane as Jennie slipped indoors. "We've settled it. Don't forget. I'll find some way to get word to you, perhaps through Euchre. Meanwhile keep up your courage. Whatever you see or hear me do, don't think less of me—"

Jennie checked him with a gesture and a wonderful gray flash of eyes. "I'll bless you with every drop of blood in my heart," she whispered passionately.

It was only as she turned away into the room that Duane saw she was lame and that she wore Mexican sandals over bare feet.

He sat down upon a bench on the porch and directed his attention to the approaching couple. When Mrs. Bland drew near Duane saw that she was a tall, strong, full-bodied woman, rather good-looking with a full-blown, bold attractiveness. Duane was more concerned with her expression than with her good looks; and as she appeared unsuspicious he felt relieved.

Euchre came up on the porch and awkwardly introduced Duane to Mrs. Bland. She was young, probably not over twenty-five. Her eyes were large, rather prominent, and brown in color. Her mouth, too, was large, with the lips full, and she had even white teeth.

Duane took her proffered hand and remarked frankly that he was glad to meet her.

Mrs. Bland appeared pleased, and her laugh was loud and rather musical. "Mr. Duane—Buck Duane, Euchre said, didn't he?" she asked.

"Buckley," corrected Duane. "The nickname's not of my choosing."

"I'm certainly glad to meet you, Buckley Duane," she said, as she took the seat Duane offered her. "Sorry to have been out. Kid Fuller's lying over at Deger's. You know he was shot last night. He's got fever today. When Bland's away I have to nurse all these shot-up boys, and it sure takes my time. Did you see that slattern girl of mine?"

She gave him a sharp glance. The woman had an extraordinary play of feature, Duane thought, and unless she was smiling was not pretty at all.

"I've been alone," replied Duane. "Haven't seen anybody but a sick-looking girl with a bucket. And she ran when she saw me."

"That was Jen," said Mrs. Bland. "She's the kid we keep here, and she sure hardly pays her keep. Did Euchre tell you about her?"

"Now that I think of it, he did say something or other."

"What did he tell you about me?" bluntly asked Mrs. Bland.

"Wal, Kate," replied Euchre, speaking for himself, "you needn't worry none, fer I told Buck nothin' but compliments."

Evidently the outlaw's wife liked Euchre, for her keen glance rested with amusement upon him. "As for Jen, I'll tell you her story some day," went on the woman. "Euchre is a tender-hearted old fool, and Jen has taken him in."

"Wal, seein' as you've got me figgered correct," replied Euchre dryly, "I'll go in an' talk to Jennie, if I may."

"Certainly. Go ahead. Jen calls you her best friend," said Mrs. Bland amiably.

When Euchre had shuffled into the house Mrs. Bland turned to Duane with curiosity and interest in her gaze. "Bland told me about you."

"What did he say?" queried Duane in pretended alarm.

"Oh, you needn't think he's done you dirt. Bland's not that kind of a man. He said, 'Kate, there's a young fellow in camp—rode in here on the dodge. He's no criminal, and he refused to join my band. Wish he would. Slickest hand with a gun I've seen for many a day! I'd like to see him and Chess meet out there in the road.' Then Bland went on to tell how you and Bosomer came together."

"What did you say?"

"Me? Why, I asked him what you looked like," she replied gayly.

"Well?" went on Duane.

"Magnificent chap, Bland said. Bigger than any man in the valley. Just a great blue-eyed, sun-burned boy!"

"Humph!" exclaimed Duane. "I'm sorry he led you to expect somebody worth seeing."

"But I'm not disappointed," she returned archly. "Duane, are you going to stay long here in camp?"

"Yes, till I run out of money and have to move. Why?"

Mrs. Bland's face underwent one of the singular changes. The smiles and flushes and glances, all that had been coquettish about her, had lent her a certain attractiveness, almost beauty and youth. But with some powerful emotion she changed and instantly became a woman of discontent.

"I'll tell you, Duane," she said earnestly. "I'm sure glad if you mean to bide here awhile. I'm a miserable woman, Duane. I'm an outlaw's wife, and I hate him and the life I have to lead. I come of a good family in Brownsville. I never knew Bland was an outlaw till long after he married me. But the truth came out. Bland shot my own cousin, who told me. My family cast me off, and I had to flee with Bland. I was only eighteen then. I've lived here since. I never see a decent woman or man. I never hear anything about my old home or folks or friends. I'm buried here—buried alive with a lot of thieves and murderers. Can you blame me for being glad to see a young fellow—a gentleman—like the boys I used to go with? I'm sick of this hole. I'm lonely—"

There appeared to be no doubt about the truth of all this. Genuine emotion checked, then halted the hurried speech. She broke down and cried.

Duane believed and pitied her. "I'm sorry for you," he said.

"Don't be *sorry* for me," she said. "That only makes me see the—the difference between you and me. And don't pay any attention to what these outlaws say about me. You'll hear that Bland killed men who ran after me. But

that's a lie. Bland, like all the other outlaws along this river, is always looking for somebody to kill. He *swears* not, but I don't believe him. He explains that gunplay gravitates to men who are the real thing—that it is provoked by the four-flushes, the bad men. I don't know. All I know is that somebody is being killed every other day. He hated Spence before Spence ever saw me."

"Would Bland object if I called on you occasionally?" inquired Duane.

"No, he wouldn't. He likes me to have friends. Ask him yourself when he comes back. The trouble has been that two or three of his men fell in love with me, and when half drunk got to fighting. You're not going to do that."

"I'm not going to get half drunk, that's certain," replied Duane.

He was surprised to see her eyes dilate, then glow with fire. Before she could reply Euchre returned to the porch, and that put an end to the conversation.

Duane was content to let the matter rest there, and had little more to say. Euchre and Mrs. Bland talked and joked, while Duane listened. He tried to form some estimate of her character. She was bitter, morbid, over-emotional. If she was a liar, which seemed likely enough, she was a frank one, and believed herself. She had no cunning. The thing which struck Duane so forcibly was that she thirsted for respect. In that he thought he had discovered a trait through which he could manage her.

Once, while he was revolving these thoughts, he happened to glance into the house, and deep in the shadow of a corner he caught a pale gleam of Jennie's face with great, staring eyes on him. She had been watching him, listening to what he said. He saw from her expression that she had realized what had been so hard for her to believe. Watching his chance, he flashed a look at her; and then it seemed to him the change in her face was wonderful.

Later, after he had left Mrs. Bland with a meaning "*Adios—manana,*" he found himself thinking of the girl instead of the woman, and of how he had seen her face blaze with hope and gratitude.

Chapter Seven

Birth of a Plan

THAT night Duane was not troubled by ghosts haunting his waking and sleeping hours. He awoke feeling bright and eager, and grateful to Euchre for having put something worth while into his mind. During breakfast, however, he was unusually thoughtful, working over the idea of how much or how little he would confide in the outlaw.

"Wal," began the old man at last, "how'd you make out with Jennie? What'd you an' she talk about?"

"We had a little chat. You know you wanted me to cheer her up."

Euchre sat with coffee cup poised and narrow eyes studying Duane. "Reckon you cheered her, all right. What I'm afeard of is mebbe you done the job too well."

"How so?"

"Wal, when I went in to Jen last night I thought she was half crazy. She was burstin' with excitement, an' the look in her eyes hurt me. She wouldn't tell me a darn word you said. But she hung

onto my hands, an' showed every way without speakin' how she wanted to thank me fer bringin' you over. Buck, it was plain to me thet you'd either gone the limit or else you'd been kinder prodigal of cheer an' hope. I'd hate to think you'd led Jennie to hope more'n ever would come true."

Euchre paused, and, as there seemed no reply forthcoming, he went on: "Buck, I've seen some outlaws whose word was good. Mine is. You can trust me. I trusted you, didn't I, takin' you over there an' puttin' you wise to my tryin' to help thet poor kid?"

Duane began to tell the conversations with Jennie and Mrs. Bland word for word. At the conclusion of the story Euchre's face lost some of its red color and beads of sweat stood out thickly on his brow.

"Wal, if thet doesn't floor me!" he ejaculated, blinking at Duane. "So thet's what it means to be a man! I guess I'd forgot. Wal, I'm old, an' anyway, I never was built fer big stunts. Do you know what it'll take to do all you promised Jen?"

"I haven't any idea," replied Duane gravely.

"You'll have to pull the wool over Kate Bland's eyes, an' even if she falls in love with you, which's shore likely, thet won't be easy. An' she'd kill you in a minnit, Buck, if she ever got wise. You ain't mistakin' her none, are you?"

"Not me, Euchre—she's a woman! I'd fear her more than any man."

"Wal, you'll have to kill Bland an' Chess Alloway an' Rugg, an' mebbe some others, before you can ride off into the hills with thet girl."

"Why? Can't we plan to be nice to Mrs. Bland and then at an opportune time sneak off without any gunplay?"

"Don't see how on earth," returned Euchre earnestly. "When Bland's away he leaves all kinds of spies an' scouts watchin' the valley trails. They've all got rifles. You couldn't git by them. But when the boss is home there's a difference. Only, of course, him an' Chess keep their eyes peeled. They both stay to home pretty much, except when they're playin' *monte* or poker over at Benson's. So I say the best bet is to pick out a good time in the afternoon, drift over careless-like with a couple of hosses, choke Mrs. Bland or knock her on the head, take Jennie with you, an' make a rush to git out of the valley.

"If you had luck you might pull thet stunt without throwin' a gun. But I reckon the best figgerin' would include dodgin' some lead an' leavin' at least Bland or Alloway dead behind you. When they come home an' find out you're visitin' Kate frequent they'll jest naturally look fer results. Chess don't like you, fer no reason except you're swift on the draw —mebbe swifter'n him. Thet's the hell of this gunplay business—no one can ever tell who's the swifter of two gunmen till they meet. Bland would treat you civil onless there was reason not to, an' then he'd prob'ly set Chess or Rugg to put you out of the way. Still Bland's no coward, an' if you came across him at a bad moment you'd have to be quicker'n you was with Bosomer."

"All right. I'll meet what comes," said Duane quietly. "The great point is to have horses ready and pick the right moment, then rush the trick through."

"Thet's the *only* chance fer success. An' you can't do it alone."

"I'll have to—I wouldn't ask you to help me."

"Wal, I'll take my chances," replied Euchre gruffly. "I'm goin' to help Jennie, you can gamble your last peso on thet. There's only four men in this camp who would shoot me—Bland, an' his right-hand pards, an' thet rabbit-faced Benson. If you happened to put out Bland and Chess, I'd stand a good show with the other two. Anyway, I'm old an' tired—what's the difference if I do git plugged? I can risk as much as you, Buck, even if I am afraid of gunplay. Now let's figger all the little details."

They talked and planned, though in truth it was Euchre who planned, Duane who listened and agreed. While awaiting the return of Bland and his lieutenants Duane was to grow friendly with the other outlaws, sit in a few games of *monte*, show a willingness to spend a little money. The two schemers were to call upon Mrs. Bland every day—Euchre to carry messages to Jennie, Duane to blind the elder woman at any cost. No hard task was it to win the friendship of most of those good-natured outlaws. They were used to men of a better order than theirs coming to the hidden camps and sooner or later sinking to their level. Besides, with them everything was easy come, easy go. There were men among them, however, that made Duane feel that terrible inexplicable wrath rise in his breast. He could not bear to be near them. He could not trust himself. Jackrabbit Benson was one of these men. Because of him and other outlaws of his ilk Duane could scarcely ever forget the reality of things. This was a robbers' den, a rendezvous for murderers, a wild place stained red by deeds of wild men. The merriest, idlest, most careless moment might in the flash of an eye end in ruthless and tragic action. In an assemblage of desperate characters it could not be otherwise.

The valley was beautiful, sunny, fragrant, a place to dream in; the mountain tops were always blue or gold-rimmed, the yellow river slid slowly and majestically by, the birds sang in the cottonwoods, the horses grazed and pranced, children played and women longed for love, freedom, happiness; the outlaws rode in and out, free with money and speech, they lived comfortably in their adobe homes, smoked, gambled, talked, laughed, whiled away the idle hours—and all the time life there was wrong, and the simplest moment might be precipitated by that evil into the most awful of contrasts. Duane felt a dark, brooding shadow over the valley.

Then, without any solicitation or encouragement from Duane, the Bland woman fell passionately in love with him. His conscience was never troubled about the beginning of that affair. She launched it herself. Duane exerted himself to please, to amuse, to interest, to fascinate her, and always with deference. That was his strong point, and it had made his part easy so far. He believed that he could carry the whole scheme through without involving himself any deeper.

He was playing at a game of love—playing with life and death! Sometimes he trembled, not that he feared Bland or Alloway or any other man, but at the deeps of life he had come to see into. He was carried out of his old mood. Not once since this daring motive had stirred him had he been haunted by the phantom of Bain beside his bed. Rather had he been haunted by Jennie's sad face, her wistful smile, her eyes.

He never was able to speak a word to her, although Euchre carried short

messages to her, and he caught glimpses of her every time he went to the Bland house. She contrived somehow to pass door or window, to give him a look when chance afforded. Often Duane knew Jennie was sitting just inside the window, and then he felt inspired in his talk, and it was all made for her. So at least she came to know him while as yet she was almost a stranger. Jennie had been instructed by Euchre to listen, to understand that this was Duane's only chance to help keep her mind from constant worry, to gather the import of every word which had a double meaning.

Euchre said that the girl had begun to wither under the strain, to burn up with intense hope which had flamed within her. But all the difference Duane could see was a paler face and darker, more wonderful eyes. The eyes seemed to be entreating him to hurry, that time was flying, that soon it might be too late. Then there was another meaning in them, a light, a strange fire wholly inexplicable to Duane. It was only a flash gone in an instant. But he remembered it because he had never seen it in any other woman's eyes. And all through those waiting days he knew that Jennie's face, and especially the warm, fleeting glance she gave him, was responsible for a subtle and gradual change in him. This change, he fancied, was only that through remembrance of her he got rid of his pale, sickening ghosts.

One day a careless Mexican threw a lighted cigarette up into the brush matting that served as a ceiling for Benson's den, and there was a fire which left little more than the adobe walls standing. The result was that while repairs were being made there was no gambling and drinking. Days passed by without a brawl, and Bland's valley saw more successive hours of peace than ever before. Duane spent more time at Mrs. Bland's; he walked miles on all the trails leading out of the valley; he had a care for the condition of his two horses.

Upon his return from the latest of these tramps Euchre suggested that they go down to the river to the boat-landing.

"Ferry couldn't run ashore this mornin'," said Euchre. "River gettin' low an' sand-bars makin' it hard fer hosses. There's a greaser freight-wagon stuck in the mud. I reckon we might hear news from the freighters. Bland's supposed to be in Mexico."

Nearly all the outlaws in camp were assembled on the riverbank, lolling in the shade of the cottonwoods. The heat was oppressive. Not an outlaw offered to help the freighters, who were trying to dig a heavily loaded wagon out of the quicksand.

Duane and Euchre joined the lazy group and sat down with them. Euchre lighted a black pipe, and, drawing his hat over his eyes, lay back in comfort after the manner of the majority of the outlaws. But Duane was alert, observing, thoughtful.

"Bland's been chased acrost the river," said one outlaw.

"Naw, he's deliverin' cattle to thet Cuban ship," replied another.

"Big deal on, hey?"

"Some big. Rugg says the boss hed an order fer fifteen thousand."

"Say, that order'll take a year to fill."

"Naw. Hardin is in cahoots with Bland. Between 'em they'll fill orders bigger'n thet."

"Wondered what Hardin was rustlin' in here fer."

Duane endeavored to get the drift of talk nearest to him.

"Kid Fuller's goin' to cash," said a sandy-whiskered little outlaw.

"So Jim was tellin' me. Blood poison, ain't it? Thet hole wasn't bad. But he took the fever," rejoined a comrade.

"Deger says the Kid might pull through if he hed nursin'."

"Wal, Kate Bland ain't nursin' any shot-up boys these days. She hasn't got time."

A laugh followed this sally; then came a penetrating silence. Some of the outlaws glanced good-naturedly at Duane. They bore him no ill will. Manifestly they were aware of Mrs. Bland's infatuation.

"Pete, 'pears to me you've said thet before."

"Shore. Wal, it's happened before."

This remark drew louder laughter and more significant glances at Duane. He did not choose to ignore them any longer.

"Boys, poke all the fun you like at me, but don't mention any lady's name again. My hand is nervous and itchy these days." He smiled as he spoke, and his speech was drawled; but the good humor in no wise weakened it.

There were grizzled outlaws in that group, some of whom had many notches on their gun handles, and they, with their comrades, accorded Duane silence that carried conviction of the regard in which he was held.

Duane could not recall any other instance where he had let fall a familiar speech to these men, and certainly he had never before hinted of his possibilities. He saw instantly that he could not have done better.

"Orful hot, ain't it?" remarked Bill Black presently, Bill could not keep quiet for long. He was a typical Texas desperado—had never been anything else. He was stoop-shouldered and bowlegged from much riding; a wiry little man, all muscle, with a square head, a hard face partly black from scrubby beard and red from sun, and a bright, roving, cruel eye. His shirt was open at the neck, showing a grizzled breast. "Is there any guy in this heah outfit sport enough to go swimmin'?" he asked.

"My Gawd, Bill, you ain't agoin' to wash!" exclaimed a comrade.

This raised a laugh in which Black joined. But no one seemed eager to join him in a bath.

"Laziest outfit I ever rustled with," went on Bill discontentedly. "Nuthin' to do! Say, if nobody wants to swim maybe some of you'll gamble?" He produced a dirty pack of cards and waved them at the motionless crowd.

"Bill, you're too good at cards," replied a lanky outlaw.

"Now, Jasper, you say thet powerful sweet, an' you look sweet, er I might take it to heart," replied Black with a sudden change of tone.

Here it was again—that upflashing passion. What Jasper saw fit to reply would mollify the outlaw or it would not. There was an even balance.

"No offense, Bill," said Jasper placidly, without moving.

Bill grunted and forgot Jasper. But he seemed restless and dissatisfied. Duane knew him to be an inveterate gambler. And as Benson's place was out of running order, Black was like a fish on dry land.

"Wal, if you-all are afraid of the cairds, what will you bet on?" he asked in disgust.

"Bill, I'll play you a game of mumbly peg fer two bits," replied one.

Black eagerly accepted. Betting to him was a serious matter. The game obsessed him, not the stakes. He entered into the mumbly-peg contest with a thoughtful mien and a corded brow. He won. Other comrades tried their luck with him and

lost. Finally, when Bill had exhausted their supply of two-bit pieces or their desire for that particular game, he offered to bet on anything.

"See thet turtledove there?" he said, pointing. "I'll bet he'll scare at one stone or he won't. Five pesos he'll fly or he won't fly when some one chucks a stone. Who'll take me up?"

That appeared to be more than the gambling spirit of several outlaws could withstand.

"Take thet. Easy money," said one.

"Who's goin' to chuck the stone?" asked another.

"Anybody," replied Bill.

"Wal, I'll bet you I can scare him with one stone," said the first outlaw.

"We're in on thet, Jim to fire the darnick," chimed in the others.

The money was put up, the stone thrown. The turtledove took flight, to the great joy of all the outlaws except Bill.

"I'll bet you-all he'll come back to thet tree inside of five minnits," he offered imperturbably.

Hereupon the outlaws did not show any laziness in their alacrity to cover Bill's money as it lay on the grass. Somebody had a watch, and they all sat down, dividing attention between the timepiece and the tree. The minutes dragged by to the accompaniment of various jocular remarks anent a fool and his money. When four and three-quarter minutes had passed a turtledove alighted in the cottonwood. Then ensued an impressive silence while Bill calmly pocketed $50.

"But it hain't the same dove!" exclaimed one outlaw excitedly. "This 'n' is smaller, dustier, not so purple."

Bill eyed the speaker loftily. "Wal, you'll have to ketch the other one to prove thet. *Sabe*, pard? Now I'll bet any gent heah the fifty I won thet I can scare thet dove with one stone."

No one offered to take his wager.

"Wal, then, I'll bet any of you even money thet you *can't* scare him with one stone."

Not proof against this chance, the outlaws made up a purse, in no wise disconcerted by Bill's contemptuous allusions to their banding together. The stone was thrown. The dove did not fly. Thereafter, in regard to that bird, Bill was unable to coax or scorn his comrades into any kind of wager. He tried them with a multiplicity of offers, and in vain.

Presently a little ragged Mexican boy came along the river trail. Bill called to him and gave him a handful of silver coins. Speechless, dazed, he went his way hugging the money.

"I'll bet he drops some before he gits to the road," declared Bill. "I'll bet he runs. Hurry, you four-flush gamblers." He failed to interest any of his companions, and forthwith became sullen and silent.

Duane, watching the disgruntled outlaw, marveled at him and wondered what was in his mind. These men were more variable than children, as unstable as water, as dangerous as dynamite.

"Bill, I'll bet you ten you can't spill whatever's in the bucket thet peon's packin'," said the outlaw called Jim.

Duane glanced from Black to the road, where he saw a crippled peon carrying a tin bucket toward the river. This peon was a half-witted Indian who lived in a shack and did odd jobs for the Mexicans.

"Jim, I'll take you up," replied Black.

Something, perhaps a harshness in his voice, caused Duane to whirl. He caught a leaping gleam in the outlaw's eye.

"Aw, Bill, thet's too fur a shot," said Jasper, as Black rested an elbow on his knee and sighted over the long, heavy Colt. The distance to the peon was about fifty paces, too far for even the most expert shot to hit a moving object so small as a bucket.

Duane was positive that Black held too high. Another look at the hard face, now tense and dark with blood, confirmed Duane's suspicion that the outlaw was not aiming at the bucket at all. Duane leaped and struck the leveled gun out of his hand. Another outlaw picked it up.

Black fell back astounded, then sullenly turned away without even asking for his gun.

Chapter Eight

Suspicion

WHAT a contrast, Duane thought, the evening of that day presented to the state of his soul!

The sunset lingered in golden glory over the distant Mexican mountains; twilight came slowly; a faint breeze blew from the river cool and sweet; a serene and tranquil peace lay over the valley.

Inside Duane there was strife. This third facing of a desperate man had thrown him off his balance. It had not been fatal, but it threatened so much. The better side of his nature seemed to urge him to die rather than to go on fighting or opposing ignorant, unfortunate, savage men. But the perversity of him was so great that it dwarfed reason, conscience. He suffered. Hope seemed far away. Despair had seized upon him and was driving him into a reckless mood when he thought of Jennie.

He had forgotten that he had promised to save her—forgotten that he meant to snuff out as many lives as might stand between her and freedom. The very remembrance sheered off his morbid introspection. She made a difference. He felt grateful to her. He had been forced into outlawry; she had been stolen from her people and carried into captivity. They had met in the river fastness, he to instil hope into her despairing life, she to be the means, perhaps, of keeping him from sinking to the level of her captors. He became conscious of a strong and beating desire to see her, talk with her.

These thoughts had run through his mind while on his way to Mrs. Bland's house. He had let Euchre go on ahead because he wanted more time to compose himself. Darkness had about set in when he reached his destination. There was no light in the house. Mrs. Bland was waiting for him on the porch.

She embraced him, and the sudden, violent, unfamiliar contact sent such a shock through him that he all but forgot the game he was playing. From her embrace and the tender, incoherent words that flowed with it he gathered that Euchre had acquainted her of his action with Black.

"He might have killed you!" she whispered, more clearly; and if Duane had ever heard love in a voice he heard it then. It softened him. After all, she was a woman, weak, unfortunate in her experience of life. He met her advance so far that he returned the embrace and kissed her. It was easy, even pleasant, to kiss her; but Duane resolved that, whatever her aban-

donment might become, he would not go further than the lie she made him act.

"Buck, you love me?" she whispered.

"Yes—yes," he burst out, eager to get it over, and even as he spoke he caught the pale gleam of Jennies face through the window. He felt a shame he was glad she could not see. What did she think of him, seeing him out there in the dusk with this bold woman in his arms? Somehow that dim sight of Jennie's pale face inspired him to his hard task of the present.

"Listen, dear," he said to the woman, and he meant his words for the girl. "I'm going to take you away from this outlaw den if I have to kill Bland, Alloway, Rugg—anybody who stands in my path. You were dragged here. You are good—I know it. There's happiness for you somewhere—a home among good people who will care for you."

Kate Bland closed her eyes and leaned her head on his breast. Duane felt her heart beat against his, and conscience smote him a keen blow. If she loved him so much! But memory and understanding of her character hardened him again.

"Boy, that's good of you," she whispered, "but it's too late. I'm done for. I can't leave Bland. All I ask is that you love me a little and stop your gun-throwing."

The moon had risen over the eastern bulge of dark mountain, and now the valley was flooded with mellow light, and shadows of cottonwoods wavered against the silver.

Suddenly the clip-clop, clip-clop of hoofs caused Duane to raise his head and listen. Horses were coming down the road from the head of the valley. Presently the narrow, moonlit lane was crossed at its far end by black moving objects—two horses.

"It's Bland!" whispered the woman, grasping Duane with shaking hands. "You must run! No, he'd see you. That'd be worse. It's Bland! I know his horse's trot."

"But you said he wouldn't mind my calling here," protested Duane. "Euchre's with me. It'll be all right."

"Maybe so," she replied, with visible effort at self-control. "If I could only think!"

Then she dragged Duane to the door, pushed him in. "Euchre, come out with me! Duane, you stay with the girl! I'll tell Bland you're in love with her. Jen, if you give us away I'll wring your neck."

The swift action and fierce whisper told Duane that Mrs. Bland was herself again. Duane stepped close to Jennie, who stood near the window. Neither spoke, but her hands were outstretched to meet his own. They were small, trembling hands, cold as ice. He held them close, trying to convey what he felt—that he would protect her. She leaned against him, and they looked out of the window.

Duane saw the riders dismount down the lane and wearily come forward. A boy led away the horses. Euchre, the old fox, was talking loud with remarkable ease, considering what he claimed was his natural cowardice.

"—that was way back in the sixties, about the time of the war," he was saying. "Rustlin' cattle wasn't nuthin' then to what it is now. An' times is rougher these days. This gun-throwin' has come to be a disease. Men have an itch for the draw same as they used to have fer poker."

The approaching outlaws, hearing voices, halted a rod or so from the porch. Then Mrs. Bland uttered an exclamation, ostensibly meant to express surprise, and hurried out to meet them. She greeted her husband warmly and gave welcome to

the other man. Duane could not see well enough in the shadow to recognize Bland's companion, but he believed it was Alloway.

"Dog-tired we are and starved," said Bland heavily. "Who's here with you?"

"That's Euchre on the porch. Duane is inside at the window with Jen," replied Mrs. Bland.

"Duane!" he exclaimed. Then he whispered low—something Duane could not catch.

"Why, I asked him to come," said the chief's wife. She spoke easily and naturally and made no change in tone. "Jen has been ailing. She gets thinner and whiter every day. Duane came here one day with Euchre, saw Jen, and went loony over her pretty face, same as all you men. So I let him come."

Bland cursed low and deep under his breath. The other man made a violent action of some kind and apparently was quieted by a restraining hand.

"Kate, you let Duane make love to Jennie?" queried Bland incredulously.

"Yes, I did," replied the wife stubbornly. "Why not? Jen's in love with him. If he takes her away and marries her she can be a decent woman."

Bland kept silent a moment, then his laugh pealed out loud and harsh.

"Chess, did you get that? Well, by God! what do you think of my wife?"

"She's lyin' or she's crazy," replied Alloway, and his voice carried an unpleasant ring.

Mrs. Bland promptly and indignantly told her husband's lieutenant to keep his mouth shut.

"Ho, ho, ho!" rolled out Bland's laugh. Then he led the way to the porch, his spurs clinking, the weapons he was carrying rattling, and he flopped down on a bench.

"How are you, boss?" asked Euchre.

"Hello, old man. I'm well, but all in."

Alloway slowly walked on to the porch and leaned against the rail. He answered Euchre's greeting with a nod. Then he stood there a dark, silent figure.

Mrs. Bland's full voice in eager questioning had a tendency to ease the situation. Bland replied briefly to her, reporting a remarkably successful trip.

Duane thought it time to show himself. He had a feeling that Bland and Alloway would let him go for the moment. They were plainly nonplussed, and Alloway seemed sullen, brooding.

"Jennie," whispered Duane, "that was clever of Mrs. Bland. We'll keep up the deception. Any day now be ready!"

She pressed close to him, and a barely audible "Hurry!" came breathing into his ear.

"Good night, Jennie," he said, aloud. "Hope you feel better tomorrow." Then he stepped out into the moonlight and spoke.

Bland returned the greeting, and, though he was not amiable, he did not show resentment.

"Met Jasper as I rode in," said Bland presently. "He told me you made Bill Black mad, and there's liable to be a fight. What did you go off the handle about?"

Duane explained the incident.

"Scurvy trick that'd been," muttered Bland. "You did right. All the same, Duane, I want you to stop quarreling with my men. If you were one of us—that'd be different."

"I guess I'll have to be hitting the trail for somewhere," said Duane.

"Why not join my band? You've got a bad start already, Duane, and if I know this border you'll never be a respectable citizen again. You're a born killer. I know

every bad man on this frontier. More than one of them have told me that something exploded in their brain, and when sense came back there lay another dead man. It's not so with me. I've done a little shooting, too, but I never wanted to kill another man just to rid myself of the last one. My dead men don't sit on my chest at night. That's the gun-fighter's trouble."

"But I'm no gun-fighter," protested Duane. "Circumstances made me—"

"No doubt," interrupted Bland with a laugh. "Circumstances made me a rustler. You don't know yourself. You're young; you've got a temper; your father was one of the most dangerous men Texas ever had. I don't see any other career for you. Instead of going it alone—a lone wolf, as the Texans say—why not make friends with other outlaws? You'll live longer."

Euchre squirmed in his seat. "Boss, I've been givin' the boy egzactly thet same line of talk. Thet's why I took him in to bunk with me. If he makes pards among us there won't be any more trouble. An' he'd be a grand feller fer the gang. I've seen Wild Bill Hickok throw a gun, an' Billy the Kid, an' Hardin, an' Chess here—all the fastest men on the border. An' with apologies to present company, I'm here to say Duane has them all skinned. His draw is different. You can't see how he does it."

Alloway shifted uneasily on his feet, his spurs jangling faintly, and did not lift his head. Bland seemed thoughtful.

"That's about the only qualification I have to make me eligible for your band," said Duane easily.

"It's good enough," replied Bland shortly. "Will you consider the idea?"

"I'll think it over. Good night."

He left the group, followed by Euchre. When they reached the end of the lane, and before they had exchanged a word, Bland called Euchre back. Duane proceeded slowly along the moonlit road to the cabin and sat down under the cottonwoods to wait for Euchre. The beauty of the soaring moon, the ebony canyons of shadow under the mountain, the melancholy serenity of the perfect night, made Duane shudder in the realization of how far aloof he now was from enjoyment of these things. Never again so long as he lived could he be natural. His eye and ear henceforth must register impressions of nature, but the joy of them had fled.

Still, as he sat there with a foreboding of more and darker work ahead of him there was yet a strange sweetness left to him, and it lay in thought of Jennie. He did not think of her as a woman, and he did not analyze his feelings. He just had vague, dreamy thoughts and imaginations that were interpersed in the constant and stern revolving of plans to save her.

A shuffling step roused him. Euchre's dark figure came crossing the moonlit grass under the cottonwoods. The moment the outlaw reached him Duane saw that he was laboring under great excitement.

"Bland kept you pretty long," Duane said.

"Wait till I git my breath," replied Euchre. He sat silent a little while, and then he went into the cabin to return presently with a lighted pipe.

"Fine night," he said. "Fine night for love affairs, by gum!"

"I'd noticed that," rejoined Duane dryly.

"Wal, I'm a son of a gun if I didn't stand an' watch Bland choke his wife till her tongue stuck out an' she got black in the face."

"No!" ejaculated Duane.

"Hope to die if I didn't. Buck, listen to this here yarn. When I got back to the porch I seen Bland was wakin' up. He'd been too fagged out to figger much. Alloway an' Kate had gone in the house, where they lit up the lamps. I heard Kate's high voice, but Alloway never chirped. He's not the talkin' kind, an' he's damn dangerous when he's thet way. Bland asked me some questions right from the shoulder. I was ready for them, an' I swore the moon was green cheese. He was satisfied. Bland always trusted me.

"Then we went into the house. Jennie had gone to her little room, an' Bland called her to come out. She said she was undressin'. An' he ordered her to put her clothes back on. Then, Buck, his next move was some surprisin'. He deliberately throwed a gun on Kate. Yes sir, he pointed his big blue Colt right at her, an' he says:

" 'I've a mind to blow out your brains.'

" 'Go ahead,' says Kate, cool as could be.

" 'You lied to me,' he roars.

"Kate laughed in his face. Bland slammed the gun down an' made a grab fer her. She fought him, but wasn't a match fer him, an' he got her by the throat. He choked her till I thought she was strangled. Alloway made him stop. She flopped down on the bed an' gasped fer a while. When she come to them hard-shelled cusses went after her, trying to make her give herself away. I think Bland was jealous. He suspected she'd got thick with you an' was foolin' him. I reckon thet's a sore feelin' fer a man to have —to guess pretty nice, but not to be sure. Bland gave it up after a while. An' then he cussed an' raved at her. One sayin' of his is worth pinnin' in your sombrero : 'It ain't nuthin' to kill a man. I don't need much fer thet. But I want to *know*, you hussy!"

"Then he went in an' dragged poor Jen out. She'd had time to dress. He was so mad he hurt her sore leg. You know Jen got thet injury fightin' off one of them devils in the dark. An' when I seen Bland twist her—hurt her—I had a queer hot feelin' deep down in me, an' fer the only time in my life I wished I was a gunfighter.

"Wal, Jen amazed me. She was whiter'n a sheet, but she had nerve.

" 'Jennie,' he said, 'my wife said Duane came here to see you. I believe she's lyin'. I think she's been carryin' on with him, an' I want to *know*. If she's been an' you tell me the truth I'll let you go. I'll send you out to Huntsville, where you can communicate with your friends. I'll give you money.'

"Thet must hev been a hell of a minnit fer Kate Bland. If ever I seen death in a man's eye I seen it in Bland's. He loves her. Thet's the strange part of it.

" 'Has Duane been comin' here to see my wife?" Bland asked, fierce-like.

" 'No,' said Jennie.

" 'He's been after you?"

" 'Yes.'

" 'He has fallen in love with you? Kate said thet.'

" 'I—I'm not—I don't know—he hasn't told me.'

" 'But you're in love with him?'

" 'Yes,' she said; an', Buck, if you only could have seen her! She throwed up her head, an' her eyes were full of fire. Bland seemed dazed at sight of her. An' Alloway, why, thet little skunk of an outlaw cried right out. He was hit plumb center. He's in love with Jen. An' the look of her then was enough to make any feller quit. He jest slunk out of the room.

"Bland stamped up an' down the room. He sure was dyin' hard. 'Jennie,' he said, turnin' to her, 'you swear in fear of your life thet you're tellin' truth. Kate's not in love with Duane? She's let him come to see *you*? There's been nuthin' between them?'

" 'No. I swear,' answered Jennie, an' Bland sat down like a man licked.

" 'Go to bed, you white-faced—' Bland positively shook in his chair.

"Jennie went then, an' Kate began to have hysterics. An' your Uncle Euchre ducked his nut out of the door an' come home."

Duane did not have a word to say at the end of Euchre's long harangue. He experienced relief. As a matter of fact, he had expected a good deal worse. He thrilled at the thought of Jennie perjuring herself to save that abandoned woman.

"Wal, there's where our little deal stands now," resumed Euchre meditatively. "You know, Buck, as well as me thet if you'd been some feller who hadn't shown he was a wonder with a gun you'd now be full of lead. If you'd happen to kill Bland an' Alloway, I reckon you'd be as safe on this here border as you would in Santone."

Chapter Nine

Over the Rim Rock

BOTH men were awake early, silent with the premonition of trouble ahead, thoughtful of the fact that the time for the long-planned action was at hand. It was remarkable that a man as loquacious as Euchre could hold his tongue so long. At the conclusion of breakfast he seemed to come to an end of deliberation.

"Buck, the sooner the better now," he declared. "The more time we use up now the less surprised Bland 'll be."

"I'm ready when you are," replied Duane quietly, and he rose from the table.

"Wal, saddle up, then," went on Euchre gruffly. "Tie on them two packs I made, one fer each saddle. You can't tell—mebbe either hoss will be carryin' double. It's good they're both big, strong hosses. Guess thet wasn't a wise move of your Uncle Euchre's—bringin' in your hosses an' havin' them ready?"

"Euchre, I hope you're not going to get in bad here. I'm afraid you are. Let me do the rest now," said Duane.

The old outlaw eyed him sarcastic-

ally. "Thet'd be turrible now, wouldn't it? If you want to know, why, I'm in bad already. I didn't tell you thet Alloway called me last night. He's gettin' wise pretty quick."

"Euchre, you're going with me?" queried Duane.

"Wal, I reckon. Either to hell or safe over the mountain! I wisht I was a gun-fighter. I hate to leave here without takin' a peg at Jackrabbit Benson. Now, Buck, you do some hard figgerin' while I go nosin' round. It's pretty early, which's all the better."

Duane packed his few belongings into his saddlebags, and then carried the saddles out to the corral. An abundance of alfalfa in the corral showed that the horses had fared well. He watered them, put on the saddles loosely cinched, and then the bridles. His next move was to fill the two canvas water bottles. That done, he returned to the cabin to wait.

At the moment he felt no excitement or agitation of any kind. There was no more thinking and planning to do. The hour had arrived, and he was ready. He understood perfectly the desperate chances he must take. Time passed slowly. Duane kept glancing at his watch. He hoped to start the thing and get away before the outlaws were out of their beds. Finally he heard the shuffle of Euchre's boots on the hard path. The sound was quicker than usual.

When Euchre came around the corner of the cabin Duane was astounded to see the outlaw white and shaking.

"Luck ours—so—fur, Buck!" he panted.

"You don't look it," replied Duane.

"I'm turrible sick. Jest killed a man. Fust one I ever killed!"

"Who?" asked Duane, startled.

"Jackrabbit Benson. An' sick as I am, I'm gloryin' in it. I went nosin' round up the road. Saw Alloway goin' into Deger's. He's thick with the Degers. Reckon he's askin' questions. Anyway, I was sure glad to see him away from Bland's. An' he didn't see me. When I dropped into Benson's there wasn't nobody there but Jackrabbit an' some greasers startin' to work. Benson said he wouldn't give a two-bit piece fer my life. I asked him why.

" 'You're double-crossin' the boss an' Chess,' he said.

" 'Jack, what'd you give fer your own life?' I asked him.

"He straightened up surprised an' mean-lookin'. An' I let him have it, plumb center! He wilted, an' the greasers run. I reckon I'll never sleep again. But I had to do it."

Duane asked if the shot had attracted any attention outside.

"I didn't see anybody but the greasers, an' I sure looked sharp. Comin' back I cut across through the cottonwoods past Bland's cabin. I meant to keep out of sight, but somehow I had an idee I might find out if Bland was awake yet. Sure enough I run plumb into Beppo, the boy who tends Bland's hosses. Beppo likes me. He said Bland had been up all night fightin' with the *Senora*. Buck, I figger Bland couldn't let up last night. He was sore, an' he went after Kate again, tryin' to wear her down. Jest as likely he might have went after Jennie, with wuss intentions. Anyway, he an' Kate

must have had it hot an' heavy. We're pretty lucky."

"It seems so. Well, I'm going," said Duane tersely.

"Lucky! I should smile! Bland's been up all night after a most draggin' ride home. He'll be fagged out this mornin', sleepy, sore, an' he won't be expectin' hell before breakfast. Now, you walk over to his house. Meet him how you like. Thet's your game. But I'm suggestin', if he comes out an' you want to parley, you can jest say you'd thought over his proposition an' was ready to join his band, or you ain't. You'll have to kill him, an' it'd save time to go fer your gun on sight. Might be wise, too, fer it's likely he'll do thet same."

"How about the horses?"

"I'll fetch them an' come along about two minnits behind you. 'Pears to me you ought to have the job done an' Jennie outside by the time I git there. Once on them hosses, we can ride out of camp before Alloway or anybody else gits into action. Jennie ain't much heavier'n a rabbit. Thet big black will carry you both."

"All right. But once more let me persuade you to stay—not to mix any more in this," said Duane earnestly.

"Nope. I'm goin'. You heard what Benson told me. Alloway wouldn't give me the benefit of any doubts. Buck, a last word—look out fer thet Bland woman!"

Duane strode away through the grove. It was about five minutes' walk up to Bland's house. To Duane it seemed long in time and distance, and he had difficulty in restraining his pace. As he walked there came a gradual and subtle change in his feelings. Again he was going out to meet a man in conflict.

No outlaws were in sight. He saw several Mexican herders with cattle. Blue columns of smoke curled up over some of the cabins. The fragrant smell of it reminded Duane of his home and cutting wood for the stove. He noted a cloud of creamy mist rising above the river, dissolving in the sunlight. Then he entered Bland's lane.

While yet some distance from the cabin he heard loud, angry voices of man and woman—Bland and Kate still quarreling! He took a quick survey of the surroundings. There was now not even a Mexican in sight. Then he hurried a little. Halfway down the lane he turned his head to peer through the cottonwoods. He saw Euchre coming with the horses.

Duane now changed his walk to a leisurely saunter. He reached the porch and then distinguished what was said inside the cabin.

"If you do, Bland, by heaven I'll fix you and her!" That was panted out in Kate Bland's full voice.

"Let me loose! I'm going in there, I tell you!" replied Bland hoarsely.

"What for?"

"I want to make a little love to her. Ha! ha! It'll be fun to have the laugh on her new lover."

"You lie!" cried Kate Bland.

"I'm not saying what I'll do to her *afterward!*" His voice grew hoarser with passion. "Let me go now!"

"No! no! I won't let you go You'll choke the—the truth out of her—you'll kill her."

"The *truth!*" hissed Bland.

"Yes. I lied. Jen lied. But she lied to save me. You needn't—murder her—for that."

Bland cursed horribly. Then followed a wrestling sound of bodies in violent straining contact—the scrape of feet—the jangle of spurs—a crash of sliding table or chair, and then the cry of a woman in pain.

Duane stepped through the open door, into the room. Kate Bland lay half across a table where she had been flung, and she was trying to get to her feet. Bland's back was turned. He had opened the door into Jennie's room and had one foot across the threshold. Duane caught the girl's low, shuddering cry. Then he called out loud and clear.

With cat-like swiftness Bland wheeled, then froze on the threshold. His sight, quick as his action, caught Duane's menacing, unmistakable position.

Bland's big frame filled the door. He was in a bad place to reach for his gun. But he would not have time for a step. Duane read in his eyes the desperate calculations of chances. For a fleeting instant Bland shifted his glance to his wife. Then his whole body seemed to vibrate with the swing of his arm.

Duane shot him. He fell forward, his gun exploding as it hit into the floor, and dropped loose from stretching fingers. Duane stood over him, stooped to turn him on his back. Bland looked up with clouded gaze, then gasped his last.

"Duane, you've killed him!" cried Kate Bland huskily. "I knew you'd have to!" She staggered against the wall, her eyes dilating, her strong hands clenching, her face slowly whitening. She appeared shocked, half stunned, but showed no grief.

"Jennie!" called Duane sharply.

"Oh—Duane!" came a halting reply.

"Yes. Come out. Hurry!"

She came out with uneven steps, seeing only him, and she stumbled over Bland's body. Duane caught her arm, swung her behind him. He feared the woman when she realized how she had been duped.

"Duane!" cried Mrs. Bland.

It was no time for talk. Duane edged on, keeping Jennie behind him. At that moment there was a pounding of iron-shod hoofs out in the lane. Kate Bland bounded to the door. When she turned back her amazement was changing to realization.

"Where're you taking Jen?" she cried, her voice like a man's.

"Get out of my way," replied Duane. His look perhaps, without speech, was enough for her. In an instant she was tranformed into a fury.

"You hound! All the time you were fooling me! You made love to me! You let me believe—you swore you loved me! Now I see what was queer about you! All for that girl! But you can't have her. You'll never leave here alive. Give me that girl! Let me—get at her! She'll never win any more men in this camp."

She was a powerful woman, and it took all Duane's strength to ward off her onslaughts. She clawed at Jennie over his upheld arm. Every second her fury increased.

"*Help! help! help!*" she shrieked in

a voice that must have penetrated to the remotest cabin in the valley.

"Let go! Let go!" cried Duane, low and sharp. He still held his gun in his right hand, and it began to be hard for him to ward the woman off. His coolness had gone with her shriek for help. "Let go!" he repeated, and he shoved her fiercely.

Suddenly she snatched a rifle off the wall and backed away, her strong hands fumbling at the lever. As she jerked it down, throwing a shell into the chamber and cocking the weapon, Duane leaped upon her. He struck up the rifle as it went off, the powder burning his face.

"Jennie, run out! Get on a horse!" he said.

Jennie flashed out of the door.

With an iron grasp Duane held to the rifle barrel. He had grasped it with his left hand, and he gave such a pull that he swung the crazed woman off the floor. But he could not loose her grip.

"Kate! Let go!"

He tried to intimidate her. She did not see his gun thrust in her face, or reason had given way to such an extent to passion that she did not care. She cursed. Her husband had used the same curses, and from her lips they seemed strange, unsexed, more deadly. Like a tigress she fought him, her face no longer resembling a woman's."

He heard a cry from outside—a man's cry, hoarse and alarming.

"Let go!" he whispered. In the grimness of that instant he relaxed his hold on the rifle barrel.

With sudden, redoubled, irresistible strength she wrenched the rifle down and discharged it. Duane felt a blow —a shock—a burning agony tearing through his breast. Then in a frenzy he jerked so powerfully upon the rifle that he threw the woman against the wall. She fell and seemed stunned.

Duane leaped back, whirled, flew out of the door to the porch. The sharp cracking of a gun halted him. He saw Jennie holding to the bridle of his bay horse. Euchre was astride the other, and he had a Colt leveled, and he was firing down the lane. Then came a single shot, heavier, and Euchre's ceased. He fell from the horse.

A swift glance back showed to Duane a man coming down the lane. Chess Alloway! His gun was smoking. He broke into a run. Then in an instant he saw Duane, and tried to check his pace as he swung up his arm. But that slight pause was fatal. Duane shot, and Alloway was falling when his gun went off. His bullet whistled close to Duane and thudded into the cabin.

Duane bounded down to the horses. Jennie was trying to hold the plunging bay. Euchre lay flat on his back, dead, a bullet hole in his shirt, his face set hard, and his hands twisted round gun and bridle.

"Jennie, you've nerve, all right!" cried Duane, as he dragged down the horse she was holding. "Up with you now! There! Never mind—long stirrups! Hang on somehow!"

He caught his bridle out of Euchre's clutching grip and leaped astride. The frightened horses jumped into a run and thundered down the lane into the road. Duane saw men running from cabins. He heard shouts.

But there were no shots fired. Jennie seemed able to stay on her horse, but without stirrups she was thrown about so much that Duane rode closer and reached out to grasp her arm.

Thus they rode through the valley to the trail that led up over the steep and broken Rim Rock. As they began to climb Duane looked back. No pursuers were in sight.

"Jennie, we're going to get away!" he cried, exultation for her in his voice.

She was gazing horror-stricken at his breast. "Oh, Duane, your shirt's all bloody!" she faltered, pointing with trembling fingers.

With her words Duane became aware of two things—the hand he instinctively placed to his breast still held his gun, and he had sustained a terrible wound.

Duane had been shot through the breast far enough down to give him grave apprehension of his life. The clean-cut hole made by the bullet bled freely both at its entrance and where it had come out, with no signs of hemorrhage.

As they rode on Jennie, with pale face and mute lips, looked at him.

"I'm badly hurt, Jennie," he said, "but I guess I'll stick it out."

"The woman—did she shoot you?"

"Yes. She was a devil. Euchre told me to look out for her. I wasn't quick enough."

"You didn't have to—to—" shivered the girl.

"No! No!" he replied.

They did not stop climbing while Duane tore a scarf and made compresses, which he bound tightly over his wounds. The fresh horses made fast time up the rough trail. From open places Duane looked down. When they surmounted the steep ascent and stood on top of the Rim Rock, with no signs of pursuit down in the valley, and with the wild, broken fastnesses before them, Duane turned to the girl and assured her that they now had every chance of escape.

"But—your—wound!" she faltered, with dark, troubled eyes. "I see—the blood—dripping from your back!"

"Jennie, I'll take a lot of killing," he said.

Then he became silent and attended to the uneven trail. He was aware presently that he had not come into Bland's camp by this route. But that did not matter; any trail leading out beyond the Rim Rock was safe enough. What he wanted was to get far away into some wild retreat where he could hide till he recovered from his wound.

He seemed to feel a fire inside his breast, and his throat burned so that it was necessary for him to take a swallow of water every little while. He began to suffer considerable pain, which increased as the hours went by and then gave way to numbness. Gradually he lost his steadiness and his keen sight; and he realized that if he were to meet foes, or if pursuing outlaws should come up with him, he could make only a poor stand. So he turned off on a trail that appeared seldom traveled.

Soon after this move he became conscious of a further thickening of his senses. He felt able to hold on to

his saddle for a while longer, but he was failing.

"Jennie, I'll give out soon," he said. "No—I don't mean—what you think. But I'll drop soon. My strength's going. If I die—you ride back the main trail. Hide and rest by day. Ride at night. That trail goes to water. I believe you could get across the Nueces, where some rancher will take you in."

Duane could not get the meaning of her incoherent reply. He rode on, and soon he could not see the trail or hear his horse. He did not know whether they traveled a mile or many times that far. But he was conscious when the horse stopped, and had a vague sense of falling and feeling Jennie's arms before all became dark to him.

When consciousness returned he found himself lying in a little hut of mesquite branches. It was well built and evidently some years old. There were two doors or openings, one in front and the other at the back. Duane imagined it had been built by a fugitive—one who meant to keep an eye both ways and not to be surprised. Duane felt weak and had no desire to move.

Sight of the two packs Euchre had made brought his thought to Jennie. What had become of her? There was evidence of her work in a smoldering fire and a little blackened coffee pot. Probably she was outside looking after the horses or getting water. He thought he heard a step and listened, but he felt tired, and presently his eyes closed and he fell into a doze.

Awakening from this, he saw Jennie sitting beside him. When he spoke she gave a start and turned eagerly.

"Duane!" she cried.

"Hello. How're you, Jennie, and how am I?" he said, finding it a little difficult to talk.

"Oh, I'm all right," she replied. "And you've come to—your wound's healed; but you've been sick. Fever, I guess. I did all I could."

Duane saw now in her a whiteness and tightness of skin, a hollowness of eye, a look of strain. "Fever? How long have we been here?" he asked.

She took some pebbles from the crown of his sombrero and counted them. 'Nine—nine days," she answered.

"Nine days!" he exclaimed incredulously. "I've been sick all the time? You nursed me?"

"Yes."

"Bland's men didn't come along here?"

"No."

"Where are the horses?"

"I keep them grazing down in a gorge back of here. There's good grass and water."

"Have you slept any?"

"A little. Lately I couldn't keep awake."

"Good Lord! I should think not. You've had a time of it sitting here day and night nursing me, watching for the outlaws. Come, tell me all about it."

"I can't remember very well," she replied simply. "We must have ridden forty miles that day we got away. You bled all the time. Toward evening you lay on your horse's neck. When

we came to this place you fell out of the saddle. I dragged you in here and stopped your bleeding. I thought you'd die that night. But in the morning, I had a little hope, I had forgotten the horses. But luckily they didn't stray far. I caught them and kept them down in the gorge. When your wounds closed and you began to breathe stronger I thought you'd get well quick. It was fever that put you back. You raved a lot, and that worried me, because I couldn't stop you. Anybody trailing us could have heard you a good ways. I don't know whether I was scared most then or when you were quiet, and it was so dark and lonely and still all around. Every day I put a stone in your hat."

"Jennie, you saved my life," said Duane.

"I don't know. Maybe, I did all I knew how to do," she replied.

Their eyes met in a long gaze, and then their hands in a close clasp.

"Jennie, we're going to get away," he said with gladness. "I'll be well in a few days. You don't know how strong I am. We'll hide by day and travel by night. I can get you across the river."

"And then?" she asked.

"We'll find some honest rancher."

"And then?" she persisted.

"Why," he began slowly, "that's as far as my thoughts ever got. It means your safety. You'll tell your story. You'll be sent to some village or town and taken care of until a relative or friend is notified."

"And you?" she inquired in a strange voice. "What will you do?"

"Jennie, I'll go back to the brakes. I daren't show my face among respectable people. I'm an outlaw."

"You're no criminal!" she declared with deep passion.

"Jennie, on this border, the little difference between an outlaw and a criminal doesn't count for much."

"You won't go back among those terrible men? You, with your gentleness and sweetness—all that's good about you? Oh, Duane, don't—don't go!"

"I can't go back to the outlaws, at least not Bland's band. No, I'll go alone. I'll lone-wolf it, as they say on the border. What else can I do, Jennie?"

"Oh, I don't know. Couldn't you hide? Couldn't you slip out of Texas —go far away?"

"I could never get out of Texas without being arrested. I could hide, but a man must live. Never mind about me, Jennie."

In three days Duane was able, with great difficulty, to mount his horse. During daylight, by short relays, he and Jennie rode back to the main trail, where they hid again till he had rested. Then in the dark they rode out of the canyons and gullies of the Rim Rock, and early in the morning halted at the first water to camp.

From that point they traveled after nightfall and went into hiding during the day. Once across the Nueces River, Duane was assured of safety for her and great danger for himself. They had crossed into a country he did not know. Somewhere east of the river there were scattered ranches. But he was as liable to find the rancher in

touch with the outlaws as he was likely to find him honest.

Duane hoped his good fortune would not desert him in this last service to Jennie. He had gotten up too soon; he had ridden too far and hard, and now he felt that any moment he might fall from his saddle. At last, far ahead he espied a patch of green and a little flat, red ranch house. He headed his horse for it and turned a face he tried to make cheerful for Jennie's sake. She seemed both happy and sorry.

When near at hand he saw that the rancher was a thrifty farmer. And thrift spoke for honesty. There were fields of alfalfa, fruit trees, corrals, windmill pumps, irrigation ditches, all surrounding a neat little adobe house. Some children were playing in the yard. Duane saw a woman come to the door, then a man. The latter looked keenly, then stepped outside. He was a sandy-haired, freckled Texan.

"Howdy, stranger," he called, as Duane halted. "Get down, you an' your woman. Say, now, air you sick or shot or what? Let me—"

Duane, reeling in his saddle, bent searching eyes upon the rancher. He thought he saw good will, kindness, honesty. Then he almost plunged from the saddle.

The rancher caught him, helped him to a bench. "Martha, come out here!" he called. "This man's sick. No, he's shot, or I don't know blood stains."

Jennie had slipped off her horse and to Duane's side. Duane appeared about to faint.

"Air you his wife?" asked the rancher.

"No. I'm only a girl he saved from outlaws. Oh, he's so pale! Duane, Duane!"

"Buck Duane!" exclaimed the rancher excitedly. "The man who killed Bland an' Alloway? Say, I owe him a good turn, an' I'll pay it, young woman."

The rancher's wife came out, and essayed to make Duane drink from a flask. When that was given him he found his voice.

"Yes, I'm Duane. I've only overdone myself—just all in. The wounds I got at Bland's are healing. Will you take this girl in—hide her awhile till the excitement's over among the outlaws?"

"I shore will," replied the Texan.

"Thanks. I'll remember you—I'll square it."

"What're you goin' to do?"

"I'll rest a bit—then go back to the brakes."

"Young man, you ain't in any shape to travel. See here—any rustlers on your trail?"

"I think we gave Bland's gang the slip."

"Good. I'll tell you what. I'll take you in along with the girl, an' hide both of you till you get well. It'll be safe. My nearest neighbor is five miles off. We don't have much company."

"You risk a great deal. Both outlaws and rangers are hunting me," said Duane.

"Never seen a ranger yet in these parts, an' I have always got along with outlaws, mebbe exceptin' Bland. I tell you I owe you a good turn."

"My horses might betray you," added Duane.

"I'll hide them in a place where there's water an' grass. Nobody goes to it. Come now, let me help you indoors."

Duane lay ill for three weeks before he began to mend, and it was another week before he could walk out a little in the dusk of the evenings. After that his strength returned rapidly. And it was only at the end of this long siege that he recovered his spirits.

"Jennie, I'll be riding off soon," he said, one evening "I can't impose on this good man Andrews much longer. I'll never forget his kindness. His wife, too—she's been so good to us. Yes, Jennie, you and I will have to say good-by very soon."

"Don't hurry away," she replied.

Lately Jennie had appeared strange to him. She had changed from the girl he used to see at Mrs. Bland's house. She wore a plain, white dress made from material Mrs. Andrews had given her. Sleep and good food had improved her. If she had been pretty out there in the outlaw den, now she was more than that. But she had the same paleness, the same strained look, the same dark eyes full of haunting shadows. After Duane's realization of the changes in her he watched her more, with a growing certainty that he would be sorry not to see her again.

"It's likely we won't ever see each other again," he said. "That's strange to think of. We've been through some hard days, and I seem to have known you a long time."

Jennie appeared shy, almost sad, so Duane changed the subject to something less personal.

Andrews returned one evening from several days' trip to Huntsville. "Duane, everybody's talkin' about how you cleaned up the Bland outfit," he said, important and full of news. "It's some exaggerated, accordin' to what you told me; but you've shore made friends on this side of the Nueces. I reckon there ain't a town where you wouldn't find people to welcome you. I met King Fisher, the boss outlaw of these parts. Well, King thinks he's a decent citizen. He was tellin' me what a grand job yours was for the border an' honest cattlemen. Now that Bland and Alloway are done for, King Fisher will find rustlin' easier. There's talk of Hardin movin' his camp over to Bland's. But I don't know how true it is. I reckon there ain't much to it. In the past when a big outlaw chief went under, his band almost always broke up an' scattered. There's no one left who could run thet outfit."

"Did you hear of any outlaws hunting me?" asked Duane.

"Nobody from Bland's outfit is huntin' you, thet's shore," replied Andrews. "Fisher said there never was a hoss straddled to go on your trail. Nobody had any use for Bland. Anyhow, his men would be afraid to trail you. An' you could go right in to Huntsville, where you'd be some popular. Reckon you'd be safe, too, except when some of them fool saloon loafers or bad cowpunchers would try to shoot you for the glory in it. Them

kind of men will bob up everywhere you go, Duane."

"I'll be able to ride and take care of myself in a day or two," went on Duane. "Then I'll go—I'd like to talk to you about Jennie."

"She's welcome to a home here with us."

"Thank you, Andrews. You're a kind man. But I want Jennie to get farther away from the Rio Grande. She'd never be safe here. Besides, she may be able to find relatives. She has some, though she doesn't know where they are."

"All right, Duane, whatever you think best. I reckon now you'd better take her to some town. Go north an' strike for Shelbyville or Crockett. Them's both good towns. I'll tell Jennie the names of men who'll help her. You needn't ride into town at all."

"Which place is nearer, and how far is it?"

"Shelbyville. I reckon about two days' ride. Poor stock country, so you ain't liable to meet rustlers. All the same, better hit the trail at night an' go careful."

At sunset two days later Duane and Jennie mounted their horses and said good-by to the rancher and his wife. Andrews would not listen to Duane's thanks.

"I tell you I'm beholden to you yet," he declared.

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked Duane. "I may come along here again some day."

"Get down an' come in, then, or you're no friend of mine. I reckon there ain't nothin' I can think of—I just happen to remember—" Here he led Duane out of earshot of the women and went on in a whisper: "Buck, I used to be well-to-do. Got skinned by a man named Brown—Rodney Brown. He lives in Huntsville, an' he's my enemy. I never was much on fightin', or I'd fixed him. Brown ruined me—stole all I had. He's a hoss an' cattle thief, an' he has pull enough at home to protect him. I reckon I needn't say any more."

"Is this Brown a man who shot an outlaw named Stevens?" queried Duane curiously.

"Shore, he's the same. I heard thet story. Brown swears he plugged Stevens through the middle. But the outlaw rode off, an' nobody ever knew for shore."

"Luke Stevens died of that shot. I buried him," said Duane.

Andrews made no further comment, and the two men returned to the women.

"The main road for about three miles, then where it forks take the left-hand road and keep on straight. That what you said, Andrews?"

"Shore. An' good luck to you both!"

Duane and Jennie trotted away into the gathering twilight. An insistent thought bothered Duane. Both Luke Stevens and Andrews had hinted to Duane to kill a man named Brown. Duane wished with all his heart that they had not mentioned it, let alone taken for granted the execution of the deed. What a bloody place Texas was! Men who robbed and men who were robbed both wanted murder. It was in the spirit of the country. Duane meant to avoid ever meeting this Rodney Brown. And that very determination showed Duane how dangerous

he really was—to men and to himself. He reasoned that only intelligence could save him—only a thoughtful understanding of his danger and a hold upon some ideal.

Then he fell into low conversation with Jennie, holding out hopeful views of her future, and presently darkness set in. The sky was overcast with heavy clouds; there was no air moving; the heat and oppression threatened storm. By and by Duane could not see a rod in front of him, though his horse had no difficulty in keeping to the road. Duane was compelled to give all his attention to peering ahead. As good luck would have it, he came to higher ground where there was less mesquite, and therefore not such impenetrable darkness; and at this point he came to where the road split.

Once headed in the right direction, he felt easier in mind. To his annoyance, however, a fine, misty rain set in. Jennie was not well dressed for wet weather; and, for that matter, neither was he. His coat was tied behind his saddle, and he put it on Jennie.

They traveled on. The rain fell steadily. Duane grew uncomfortably wet and chilly. Jennie, however, fared somewhat better by reason of the heavy coat. The night passed quickly despite the discomfort, and soon a gray, dismal, rainy dawn greeted the travelers.

Jennie insisted that he find some shelter where a fire could be built to dry his clothes. Duane's teeth were chattering. To find a shelter in that barren waste seemed a futile task. Quite unexpectedly, however, they happened upon a deserted adobe cabin situated a little off the road. Not only did it have a dry interior, but also there was firewood. Water was available in pools everywhere; however, there was no grass for the horses.

A good fire and hot food and drink brought comfort, and Jennie lay down to sleep. For Duane, however, there must be vigilance. This cabin was no hiding-place. The rain fell harder all the time, and the wind changed to the north. "It's a norther, all right," muttered Duane. "Two or three days."

Jennie slept while Duane watched. The saving of this girl meant more to him than any task he had ever assumed. First it had been partly from a human feeling to succor an unfortunate woman, and partly a motive to establish clearly to himself that he was no outlaw. Lately, however, had come a different sense, a strange one, with something personal and warm and protective in it.

As he looked down upon her, a slight, slender girl with bedraggled dress and disheveled hair, her face, pale and quiet, a little stern in sleep, and her long, dark lashes lying on her cheek, he seemed to see her fragility, her prettiness, her femininity as never before. But for him she might at that very moment have been a broken, ruined girl lying back in that cabin of the Blands'. The fact gave him a feeling of his importance in this shifting of her destiny. She was unharmed, still young; she would forget and be happy; she would live to be a good wife and mother. Somehow the thought swelled his heart. His act, death-dealing as it had been, was

a noble one, and helped him to hold on to his drifting hopes. Hardly once since Jennie had entered into his thought had those ghosts returned to torment him.

Tomorrow she would be gone among good, kind people with a possibility of finding her relatives. He thanked God for that; nevertheless, he felt a pang.

She slept more than half the day. Duane kept guard, always alert, whether he was sitting, standing, or walking. The rain pattered steadily on the roof and sometimes came in gusty flurries through the door. The horses were outside in a shed that afforded poor shelter, and they stamped restlessly. Duane kept them saddled and bridled.

About the middle of the afternoon Jennie awoke. They cooked a meal and afterwards sat beside the little fire.

"This time tomorrow you'll be in Shelbyville," he said.

"Where will you be?" she asked quickly.

"Me? Oh, I'll be making tracks for some lonesome place," he replied.

The girl shuddered. "I've been brought up in Texas. I remember what a hard lot the men of my family had. But poor as they were, they had a roof over their heads, a hearth with a fire, a warm bed—somebody to love them. And you, Duane—oh, my God! What must your life be? You must ride and hide and watch eternally. No decent food, no pillow, no friendly word, no clean clothes, no woman's hand! Horses, guns, trails, rocks, holes—these must be the important things in your life. You must go on riding, hiding, killing until you meet—"

She ended with a sob and dropped her head on her knees. Duane was amazed, deeply touched.

"Thank you for that thought of me," he said with a tremor in his voice. "You don't know how much that means to me."

She raised her face, and it was tear-stained, eloquent, beautiful. "I've heard tell—the best of men go to the bad out there. You won't—promise me you won't! I never—knew any man—like you. I—I—we may never see each other again—after today. I'll never forget you. I'll pray for you and I'll never give up trying to—to do something. Don't despair. It's never too late. It was my hope that kept me alive—out there at Bland's—before you came. I was only a poor weak girl. But if I could hope—so can you. Stay away from men. Be a lone wolf. Fight for your life. Stick out your exile—and maybe—some day—"

Then she lost her voice. Duane clasped her hand and with feeling as deep as hers promised to remember her words.

Duane's vigilance, momentarily broken by emotion, had no sooner reasserted itself than he discovered the bay horse, the one Jennie rode, had broken his halter and gone off. The soft wet earth had deadened the sound of his hoofs. His tracks were plain in the mud. There were clumps of mesquite in sight, among which the horse might have strayed. It turned out, however, that he had not done so.

Duane did not want to leave Jennie alone in the cabin so near the road.

So he put her up on his horse and bade her follow. The rain had ceased for the time being, though evidently the storm was not yet over. The tracks led up a wash to a wide flat where mesquite, prickly pear, and thorn bush grew so thickly that Jennie could not ride into it. Duane was thoroughly concerned. He must have her horse. He could not expect her to scramble through the brake on foot. Therefore he decided to risk leaving her at the edge of the thicket and go in alone.

As he went in a sound startled him. Was it the breaking of a branch he had stepped on or thrust aside? He heard the impatient pound of his horse's hoofs. Then all was quiet. Still he listened, not wholly satisfied. He was never satisfied in regard to safety; he knew too well that there never could be safety for him in this country.

The bay horse had threaded the aisles of the thicket. Duane wondered what had drawn him there. Certainly it had not been grass, for there was none. Presently he heard the horse tramping along, and then he ran. The mud was deep, and the sharp thorns made going difficult. He came up with the horse, and at the same moment crossed a multitude of fresh horse tracks.

He bent lower to examine them, and was alarmed to find that they had been made very recently, even since it had ceased raining. They were tracks of well shod horses. Duane straightened up with a cautious glance all around. His instant decision was to hurry back to Jennie. But he had come a goodly way through the thicket, and it was impossible to rush back. Once or twice he imagined he heard crashings in the brush, but did not halt to make sure.

Suddenly there came an unmistakable thump of horses' hoofs off somewhere to the fore. Then a scream rent the air. It ended abruptly. Duane leaped forward, tore his way through the thorny brake. He heard Jennie cry again—an appealing call quickly hushed. It seemed more to his right, and he plunged that way.

He burst into a glade where a smoldering fire and ground covered with footprints and tracks showed that campers had lately been there. Rushing across this, he broke his passage out to the open. But he was too late. His horse had disappeared. Jennie was gone. There were no riders in sight. There was no sound. There was a heavy trail of horses going north. Jennie had been carried off—probably by outlaws. Duane realized that pursuit was out of the question—that Jennie was lost.

Chapter Ten

Specters

A HUNDRED MILES from the haunts most familiar with Duane's deeds, far up where the Nueces ran a trickling clear stream between yellow cliffs, stood a small deserted shack of covered mesquite poles. It had been made long ago, but was well preserved. A door

faced the overgrown trail, and another faced down into a gorge of dense thickets.

It was a wild spot, lonely, not fit for human habitation except for the outcast. He, perhaps, might have found it hard to leave for most of the other wild nooks in that barren country. Down in the gorge there was never-failing sweet water, grass all the year round, cool, shady retreats, deer, rabbits, turkeys, fruit, and miles and miles of narrow-twisting, deep canyon full of broken rocks and impenetrable thickets. The scream of the panther was heard there, the squall of the wildcat, the cough of the jaguar. Innumerable bees buzzed in the spring blossoms, and, it seemed, scattered honey to the winds. All day there was continuous song of birds, that of the mockingbird loud and sweet above the rest.

On clear days—and rare indeed were cloudy days—with the subsiding of the wind at sunset a hush seemed to fall around the little hut. Far-distant dim-blue mountains stood gold-rimmed gradually to fade with the shading of light.

At this quiet hour a man climbed up out of the gorge and sat in the westward door of the hut. This lonely watcher of the west and listener to the silence was Duane. This hut was the one where, three years before, Jennie had nursed him back to life.

The killing of a man named Sellers, and the combination of circumstances that had made the tragedy a memorable regret, had marked, if not a change, at least a cessation in Duane's activities. He had trailed Sellers to kill him for the supposed abducting of Jennie—trailed him long after he had learned Sellers traveled alone. Duane wanted absolute assurance of Jennie's death.

Vague rumors, a few words here and there, unauthenticated stories, were all Duane had gathered in years to substantiate his belief—that Jennie died shortly after the beginning of her second captivity. But Duane did not know surely. Sellers might have told him. Duane expected, if not to force it from him at the end, to read it in his eyes. But the bullet went too unerringly; it locked his lips and fixed his eyes.

After that meeting Duane lay long at the ranch house of a friend, and when he recovered from the wound Sellers had given him he started with two horses and a pack for the lonely gorge on the Nueces. There he had been hidden for months, a prey to remorse, a dreamer, a victim of phantoms.

It took work to find subsistence in that rocky fastness. And work, action, helped to pass the hours. But he could not work all the time, even if he had found it to do. Then in his idle moments and at night his task was to live with the hell in his mind.

The sunset and the twilight hour made all the rest bearable. The little hut on the rim of the gorge seemed to hold Jennie's presence. He hoped Jennie had not survived her second misfortune; and that intense hope had burned into belief. Upon his return to that locality, on the occasion of his first visit to the hut, he had found things just as they had left them, and a poor, faded piece of ribbon Jennie had used to tie around her

bright hair. No wandering outlaw or traveler had happened upon the lonely spot, which further endeared it to Duane.

A strange feature of this memory of Jennie was the freshness of it—the failure of years, toil, strife, death-dealing to dim it, to deaden the thought of what might have been. He could shut his eyes and see Jennie before him just as clearly as if she had stood there in the flesh. For hours he did that, dreaming of life he had never tasted and now never would taste. He saw Jennie's slender, graceful figure, the old brown ragged dress in which he had seen her first at Bland's, her little feet in Mexican sandals, her fine hands coarsened by work, her round arms and swelling throat, and her pale, sad, beautiful face with its staring dark eyes. He remembered every look she had given him, every word she had spoken to him, every time she had touched him. He thought of her beauty and sweetness, of the few things which had come to mean to him that she must have loved him; and he trained himself to think of these in preference to her life at Bland's, the escape with him, and then her recapture, because such memories led to bitter, fruitless pain.

Sitting there, eyes wide open, he dreamed of the old homestead and his white-haired mother. He saw the old home life go on before his eyes with him a part of it.

Then in the inevitable reaction, in the reflux of bitter reality, he would send out a voiceless cry no less poignant because it was silent: *Poor fool! No, I shall never see Mother again—never go home—never have a home. Oh, God! I wish it were over! I am an outlaw, an outcast, dead to the good and decent world. I am alone—alone. Better be a callous brute or better dead! Man, what is left to you? A hiding-place like a wolf's—lonely silent days, lonely nights with phantoms! Or the trail and the road with their bloody tracks, and then the hard ride, the sleepless, hungry ride to some hole in rocks or brakes. What hellish thing drives me? Why can't I end it all? What is left? Only that damned spirit of the gun-fighter to live—to hang on to miserable life—to have no fear of death, yet to cling like a leech—to die as gun-fighters seldom die, with boots off! Bain, you were first, and you're long avenged. And Sellers, you were last, and you're avenged. And you others—you're avenged. Lie quiet in your graves and give me peace!*

But they did not lie quiet in their graves and give him peace. A group of specters trooped out of the shadows of dusk and, gathering round him, escorted him to his bed.

When Duane had been riding the trails passion-bent to escape pursuers, or passion-bent in his search, the constant action and toil and exhaustion made him sleep. But when in hiding, as time passed, gradually he required less rest and sleep, and his mind became more active. Little by little his phantoms gained hold on him, and at length, but for the saving power of his dreams, they would have claimed him utterly.

How many times he had said to himself: "I am an intelligent man. I'm not crazy. I'm in full possession of my faculties. All this is fancy—imagination—conscience. I've no work, no duty,

no ideal, no hope—and my mind is obsessed, thronged with images. And these images naturally are of the men with whom I have dealt. I can't forget them. They come back to me, hour after hour; and when my tortured mind grows weak, then maybe I'm not just right till the mood wears out and lets me sleep."

So he reasoned as he lay down in his comfortable camp. The night was star-bright above the canyon-walls, darkly, shadowing down between them. The insects hummed and chirped and thrummed a continuous thick song, low and monotonous. Slow-running water splashed softly over stones in the stream-bed. From far down the canyon came the mournful hoot of an owl. The moment he lay down, thereby giving up action for the day, all these things weighed upon him like a great heavy mantle of loneliness.

He wondered how many outcasts like him lay under this star-studded, velvety sky across the 1500 miles of wild country between El Paso and the mouth of the river. A vast wild territory—a refuge for outlaws! Somewhere he had heard or read that the Texas Rangers kept a book with names and records of outlaws—3000 known outlaws! Yet these could scarcely be half of that unfortunate horde which had been recruited from all over the states. Duane had traveled from camp to camp, den to den, hiding-place to hiding-place, and he knew these men. Most of them were hopeless criminals; some were avengers; a few were wronged wanderers; and among them occasionally was a man, human in his way, honest as he could be, not yet lost to good.

But all of them were akin in one sense—their outlawry; and that starry night they lay with their dark faces up, some in packs like wolves, others alone like the gray wolf who knew no mate. It did not make much difference in Duane's thought of them that the majority were steeped in crime and brutality, more often than not stupid from rum, incapable of a fine feeling, just lost wild dogs.

Duane doubted that there was a man among them who did not realize his moral wreck and ruin. He had met poor, half-witted wretches who knew it. He believed he could enter into their minds and feel the truth of all their lives—the hardened outlaw, coarse, ignorant, bestial, who murdered as Bill Black had murdered, who stole for the sake of stealing, who craved money to gamble and drink, defiantly ready for death, and, like that terrible outlaw, Helm, who cried out on the scaffold, "Let her rip!"

The wild youngsters seeking notoriety and reckless adventure; the cowboys with a notch on their guns, with boastful pride in the knowledge that they were marked by rangers; the crooked men from the North, defaulters, forgers, murderers, all pale-faced, flat-chested men not fit for that wilderness and not surviving; the dishonest cattlemen, hand and glove with outlaws, driven from their homes; the old grizzled, bowlegged genuine rustlers—all these Duane had come in contact with, had watched and known, and as he felt with them he seemed to see that as their lives were bad, sooner or later to end dismally or tragically, so they must pay some kind of earthly penalty—if not of conscience, then of fear; if not

of fear, then of that most terrible of all things to restless, active men—pain, the pang of flesh and bone.

Duane knew, for he had seen them pay. Best of all, moreover, he knew the internal life of the gun-fighter of that select but by no means small class of which he was representative. The world that judged him and his kind judged him as a machine, a killing-machine, with only mind enough to hunt, to meet, to slay another man. It had taken three endless years for Duane to understand his own father. Duane knew beyond all doubt that the gun-fighters like Bland, like Alloway, like Sellers, men who were evil and had no remorse, had something far more torturing to mind, more haunting, more murderous of rest and sleep and peace; and that something was abnormal fear of death. Duane knew this, for he had shot these men; he had seen the quick, dark shadow in eyes, the presentiment that the will could not control, and then the horrible certainty.

These men must have been in agony at every meeting with a possible or certain foe—more agony than the hot rend of a bullet. They were haunted, too, haunted by this fear, by every victim calling from the grave that nothing was so inevitable as death, which lurked behind every corner, hid in every shadow, lay deep in the dark tube of every gun. These men could not have a friend; they could not love or trust a woman. They knew their one chance of holding on to life lay in their own distrust, watchfulness, dexterity, and that hope, by the very nature of their lives, could not be lasting. They had doomed themselves.

The hell in Duane's mind was not fear of man or fear of death. He would have been glad to lay down the burden of life, providing death came naturally. Many times he had prayed for it. But that overdeveloped, superhuman spirit of defense in him precluded suicide or the inviting of an enemy's bullet. Sometimes he had a vague, scarcely analyzed idea that this spirit was what had made the Southwest habitable for the white man.

Every one of his victims, singly and collectively, returned to him for ever, it seemed, in cold, passionless, accusing domination of these haunted hours. They did not accuse him of dishonor or cowardice or brutality or murder; they only accused him of death. It was as if they knew more than when they were alive, had learned that life was a divine, mysterious gift not to be taken. They thronged about him with their voiceless clamoring, drifted around him with their fading eyes.

Chapter Eleven

Quarry and Pursuers

AFTER nearly six months in the Nueces gorge the loneliness and inaction of his life drove Duane out upon the trails seeking anything rather than to hide longer alone, a prey to the scourge of his thoughts. The moment he rode into sight of men a remarkable transformation occurred in him. A strange warmth stirred in him—a longing to

see the faces of people, to hear their voices—a pleasurable emotion sad and strange. But it was only a precursor of his old bitter, sleepless, and eternal vigilance. When he hid alone in the brakes he was safe from all except his deeper, better self; when he escaped from this into the haunts of men his force and will went to the preservation of his life.

Mercer was the first village he rode into. He had many friends there. Mercer claimed to owe Duane a debt. On the outskirts of the village there was a grave overgrown by brush so that the rude-lettered post which marked it was scarcely visible to Duane as he rode by. He had never read the inscription. But he thought now of Hardin, no other than the erstwhile ally of Bland. For many years Hardin had harassed the stockmen and ranchers in and around Mercer. On an evil day for him he or his outlaws had beaten and robbed a man who once succored Duane when sore in need. Duane met Hardin in the little plaza of the village, called him every name known to border men, taunted him to draw and killed him.

Duane went to the house of one Jones, a Texan who had known his father, and there he was warmly received. The feel of an honest hand, the voice of a friend, the prattle of children who were not afraid of him or his gun, good wholesome food, and change of clothes—these things for the time being made a changed man of Duane. Eagerly he drank in all the news that was told him. In the years of his absence from home he had never heard a word about his mother or uncle. Those who were his real friends on the border would have been the last to make inquiries, to write or receive letters that might give a clue to Duane's whereabouts.

Duane remained all day with this hospitable Jones, and as twilight fell was loath to go and yielded to a pressing invitation to remain overnight. Early in the evening, while Duane sat on the porch with two awed and hero-worshipping sons of the house, Jones returned from a quick visit down to the post office. Summarily he sent the boys off. He labored under intense excitement.

"Duane, there's rangers in town," he whispered. "It's all over town too, that you're here. You rode in long after sunup. Lots of people saw you. I don't believe there's a man or boy that'd squeal on you. But the women might. They gossip, and these rangers are handsome fellows—devils with the women."

"What company of rangers?" asked Duane quietly.

"Company A, under Captain MacNelly, that new ranger. He made a big name in the war. And since he's been in the ranger service he's done wonders. He's cleaned up some bad places south, and he's working north."

"MacNelly. I've heard of him. Describe him to me."

"Slight-built chap, but wiry and tough. Clean face, black mustache and hair. Sharp black eyes. He's got a look of authority. MacNelly's a fine man, Duane. I'd hate to have him look you up."

Duane did not speak.

"MacNelly's got nerve, and his rangers are all experienced men. If they find out you're here they'll come after you. MacNelly's no gun-fighter, but he wouldn't hesitate to do his duty,

even if he faced sure death—which he would in this case. Duane, you mustn't meet Captain MacNelly. Your record is clean, if it is terrible. You never met a ranger or any officer except a rotten sheriff now and then."

Still Duane kept silence. He was not thinking of danger, but of the fact of how fleeting must be his stay among friends.

"I've already fixed up a pack of grub," went on Jones. "I'll slip out to saddle your horse. You watch here."

He had scarcely uttered the last words when soft, swift footsteps sounded on the hard path. A man turned in at the gate. The light was dim, yet clear enough to disclose an unusually tall figure. When it appeared nearer he was seen to be walking with both arms raised, hands high. He slowed his stride. "Does Burt Jones live here?" he asked in a low, hurried voice.

"I reckon. I'm Burt. What can I do for you?" replied Jones.

The stranger peered around, stealthily came closer, still with his hands up. "It is known that Buck Duane is here. Captain MacNelly's camping on the river just out of town. He sends word to Duane to come out there after dark." He wheeled and departed as swiftly and strangely as he had come.

"Bust me! Duane, whatever do you make of that?" exclaimed Jones.

"A new one on me," replied Duane thoughtfully.

"First fool thing I ever heard of MacNelly doing. Can't make head nor tails of it. I'd have said off-hand that MacNelly wouldn't double-cross anybody. He struck me as a square man, sand all through. But, hell! he must mean treachery. I can't see anything else in that deal."

"Maybe the captain wants to give me a fair chance to surrender without bloodshed," observed Duane. "Pretty decent of him, if he meant that."

"He *invites* you out to his camp *after dark.* Something strange about this, Duane. But MacNelly's a new man out here. He does some queer things. Well, whatever his intentions, you hit the road and put some miles between you and the amiable captain before daylight. Tomorrow I'll go out there and ask him what in the devil he meant."

"That messenger he sent—he was a ranger," said Duane.

"Sure he was, and a nervy one! It must have taken sand to come bracing you that way. Duane, the fellow didn't pack a gun. I'll swear to that. Pretty odd, this trick. But you can't trust it. Hit the road, Duane."

A little later a black horse with muffled hoofs, bearing a tall, dark rider who peered keenly into every shadow, trotted down a pasture lane back of Jones's house, turned into the road, and then, breaking into swifter gait, rapidly left Mercer behind.

Fifteen or twenty miles out Duane drew rein in a forest of mesquite, dismounted, and searched about for a glade with a little grass. Here he staked his horse on a long lariat; and, using his saddle for a pillow, his saddle blanket for covering, he went to sleep.

Next morning he was off again, working south. During the next few days he paid brief visits to several villages that lay in his path. And in each some friend had a piece of news to impart. A ranger had made a quiet, unobtrusive call upon these friends and left this

message: "Tell Buck Duane to ride into Captain MacNelly's camp some time after night."

Duane concluded, and his friends all agreed with him, that the new ranger's main purpose in the Nueces country was to capture or kill Buck Duane, and that this message was simply an original and striking ruse, the daring of which might appeal to certain outlaws.

But it did not appeal to Duane. His curiosity was aroused; it did not, however, tempt him to any foolhardy act. He turned southwest and rode until he again reached the sparsely settled country. Here he heard no more of rangers. It was a barren region he had never but once ridden through, and that ride had cost him dear. Outlaws were not in accord with the few ranchers and their cowboys who ranged there. He learned that both outlaws and Mexican raiders had long been at bitter enmity with these ranchers. Being unfamiliar with roads and trails, Duane pushed on into the heart of this district, when all the time he really believed he was traveling around it. A rifle shot from a ranch house, a deliberate attempt to kill him because he was an unknown rider in those parts, and a hard ride to get away persuaded him to return to his old methods of hiding by day and traveling by night.

He got into rough country, rode for three days without covering much ground, but believed that he was getting on safer territory. Twice he came to a wide bottomland green with willow and cottonwood and thick as chaparral, somewhere through the middle of which ran a river he decided must be the lower Nueces.

One evening, as he stole out from a covert where he had camped, he saw the lights of a village. He tried to pass it on the left, but was unable to because the brakes of this bottomland extended in almost to the outskirts of the village, and he had to retrace his steps and go round to the right. Wire fences and horses in pasture made this a task, so it was well after midnight before he accomplished it. He made ten miles or more then by daylight, and after that proceeded cautiously along a road which appeared to be well worn from travel. He passed several thickets where he would have halted to hide during the day but for the fact that he had to find water.

He was a long while in coming to it, and then there was no thicket or clump of mesquite near the water hole that would afford him cover. So he kept on.

The country before him was ridgy and began to show cottonwoods here and there in the hollows, and yucca and mesquite on the higher ground. As he mounted a ridge he noted that the road made a sharp turn, and he could not see what was beyond it. He slowed up and he was making the turn, which was downhill between high banks of yellow clay, when his horse shied at something and bolted.

The few bounds he took before Duane's iron arm checked him were enough to reach the curve. One flashing glance showed Duane the open once more, a little valley below with a wide, shallow, rocky stream, a clump of cottonwoods beyond, a somber group of men facing him, and two dark, limp, strangely grotesque figures hanging from branches.

A hoarse voice pealed out: "By hell! there's another one!"

"Stranger, ride down an' account fer yourself!" yelled another.

"Hands up!"

"Thet's right, Jack; don't take no chances. Plug him!"

Duane was wheeling his horse when a rifle cracked. The bullet struck his left forearm and he dropped the rein. The frightened horse leaped. Another bullet whistled past Duane. Then the bend in the road saved him. Like the wind his fleet steed went down the long hill.

Duane's chief concern of the moment was for his injured arm. He found that the bones were still intact; but the wound, having been made by a soft bullet, was an exceedingly bad one. Blood poured from it. Giving the horse his head, Duane wound his scarf tightly round the holes, and with teeth and hand tied it tightly. That done, he looked back over his shoulder.

Riders were making the dust fly on the hillside road. There were more coming round the cut where the road curved. The leader was perhaps a quarter of a mile back, and the others strung out behind him. Duane needed only one glance to tell him that they were fast and hard-riding cowboys in a land where all riders were good. Moreover, it was a district where ranchers had suffered beyond all endurance the greed and brutality of outlaws. Duane had run right into a lynching party at a time when any stranger would be in danger and any outlaw put to his limit to escape with his life.

Duane did not look back again till he had crossed the ridgy piece of ground and had gotten to the level road. He had gained upon his pursuers. When he ascertained this he tried to save his horse, to check a little that killing gait. This horse was a magnificent animal, big, strong, fast; but his endurance had never been put to a grueling test, and that worried Duane.

Duane had only one plan—the only plan possible in this case—and that was to make the river-bottoms, where he might elude his pursuers in the willow brakes. Fifteen miles or so would bring him to the river, and this was not a hopeless distance for any good horse if not too closely pressed. Duane concluded presently that the cowboys behind were losing a little in the chase because they were not extending their horses. Duane pondered over this, looking backward several times to see if their horses were stretched out. They were not, and the fact was disturbing.

Only one reason presented itself to Duane's conjecturing, and it was that with him headed straight on that road his pursuers were satisfied not to force the running. He began to hope and look for a trail or a road turning off to right or left. There was none. A rough, mesquite-dotted, and yucca-spired country extended away on either side. Duane believed that he would be compelled to take to this hard going. One thing was certain—he had to go round the village. The river, however, was on the outskirts of the village; and once in the willows, he would be safe.

Dust clouds far ahead caused his alarm to grow. He watched with his eyes strained; he hoped to see a wagon, a few stray cattle. But no, he soon descried several horsemen. Shots and yells behind him attested to the fact that his pursuers likewise had seen these newcomers. More than a mile separated these two parties, yet that distance did not keep them from soon understanding each other. With a muttered curse, Duane

spurred his horse off the road into the brush.

He chose the right side, because the river lay nearer that way. There were patches of open sandy ground between clumps of cactus and mesquite, and he found that despite a zigzag course he made better time. It was impossible for him to locate his pursuers. They would come together, he decided, and take to his tracks.

What, then, was his surprise and dismay to run out of a thicket right into a low ridge of rough, broken rock, impossible to get a horse over. He wheeled to the left along its base. The sandy ground gave place to a harder soil, where his horse did not labor so. Here the growths of mesquite and cactus became scanter, affording better travel but poor cover. He kept sharp eyes ahead, and, as he had expected, soon saw moving dust clouds and the dark figures of horses. They were half a mile away, and swinging obliquely across the flat.

Without an instant's hesitation Duane put his horse to his best efforts, straight ahead. He had to pass those men. When this was seemingly made impossible by a deep wash from which he had to turn, Duane began to feel cold and sick. Was this the end? He wanted then to ride straight at these pursuers. But reason outweighed instinct. He was fleeing for his life; nevertheless, the strongest instinct at the time was his desire to fight.

He knew when three horsemen saw him, and a moment afterwards he lost sight of them as he got into the mesquite again. He meant now to try to reach the road, and pushed his mount severely, though still saving him for a final burst. Rocks, thickets, bunches of cactus, washes—all operated against his following a straight line. Almost he lost his bearings, and finally would have ridden toward his enemies had not good fortune favored him in the matter of an open burned-over stretch of ground.

Here he saw both groups of pursuers, one on each side and almost within gunshot. Their sharp yells, as much as his cruel spurs, drove his horse into that pace which now meant life or death for him. And never had Duane bestrode a gamer, swifter, stancher beast. In the dragging sand he was far superior to any horse in pursuit, and on this sandy open stretch he gained enough to spare a little in the brush beyond. Heated now and thoroughly terrorized, he kept the pace through thickets that almost tore Duane from his saddle. Something weighty and grim eased off Duane. He was going to get out in front! The horse had speed, fire.

Duane dashed out into another open place dotted by few trees, and here, right in his path, within pistol range, stood horsemen waiting. They yelled, they spurred toward him, but did not fire at him. He turned his horse—faced to the right. Only one thing kept him from standing his ground to fight it out. He remembered those dangling limp figures hanging from the cottonwoods. These ranchers would rather hang an outlaw than shoot him. They might draw all his fire and then capture him.

A race began then, a dusty, crashing drive through gray mesquite. Duane could scarcely see, he was so blinded by stinging branches across his eyes. The hollow wind roared in his ears. He lost his sense of the nearness of his pursuers. But they must have been close. Did

they shoot at him? He imagined he heard shots. But that might have been the cracking of dead snags.

His left arm hung limp, almost useless; he handled the rein with his right; and most of the time he hung low over the pommel. The gray walls flashing by him, the whip of twigs, the rush of wind, the heavy, rapid pound of hoofs, the violent motion of his horse—these vied in sensation with the smart of sweat in his eyes, the rack of his wound, the cold, sick cramp in his stomach. With these also was dull, raging fury. He had to run when he wanted to fight. It took all his mind to force back that bitter hate of himself, of his pursuers, of this race for his useless life.

Suddenly he burst out of a line of mesquite into the road. A long stretch of lonely road! How fiercely, with hot, strange joy, he wheeled his horse upon it! Then he was sweeping along, sure now that he was out in front. His horse still had strength and speed, but showed signs of breaking. Presently Duane looked back. Pursuers—he could not count how many—were loping along in his rear. He paid no more attention to them, and with teeth set he faced ahead, grimmer now in his determination to foil them.

He passed a few scattered ranch houses where horses whistled from corrals, and men curiously watched him fly past. He saw one rancher running, and he felt intuitively that this fellow was going to join in the chase. Duane's steed pounded on, not noticeably slower, but with a lack of former smoothness, with a strained, convulsive, jerking stride which showed he was almost done.

Sight of the village ahead surprised Duane. He had reached it sooner than he expected. Then he made a discovery—he had entered the zone of wire fences. As he dared not turn back now, he kept on, intending to ride through the village. Looking backward, he saw that his pursuers were half a mile distant, too far to alarm any villagers in time to intercept him in his flight. As he rode by the first houses his horse broke down and began to labor.

Saddled horses in front of a store gave Duane an idea. As he pulled in his heaving mount and leaped off, a couple of ranchers came out of the place, and one of them stepped to a clean-limbed, fiery bay. He was about to get into his saddle when he saw Duane, and then he halted, a foot in the stirrup.

Duane strode forward, grasped the bridle of this man's horse. "Mine's done—but not killed," he panted. "Trade with me."

"Wal, stranger, I'm shore always ready to trade," drawled the man. "But ain't you a little swift?"

Duane glanced back up the road. His pursuers were entering the village.

"I'm Duane—Buck Duane," he cried. "Will you trade? Hurry!"

The rancher, turning white, dropped his foot from the stirrup and fell back. "I reckon I'll trade," he said.

Bounding up, Duane dug spurs into the bay's flanks. The horse snorted in fright, plunged into a run. He was fresh, swift, half wild. Duane flashed by the remaining houses on the street out into the open. But the road ended at that village or else led out from some other quarter, for he had ridden straight into the fields and from them into rough desert. When he reached the cover of mesquite once more he looked back

to find six horsemen within rifle shot of him, and more coming behind them.

His new horse had not had time to get warm before Duane reached a high sandy bluff below which lay the willow brakes. As far as he could see extended an immense flat strip of red-tinged willow. Zigzagging down the soft slope, he put the bay to the dense wall of leaf and branch. But the horse balked.

There was little time to lose. Dismounting, he dragged the stubborn beast into the thicket. This was harder and slower work than Duane cared to risk. If he had not been rushed he might have had better success. So he had to abandon the horse—a circumstance that only such sore straits could have driven him to. Then he went slipping swiftly through the narrow aisles.

He had not gotten under cover any too soon. He heard his pursuers piling over the bluff, loud-voiced, confident, brutal. They crashed into the willows.

"Hi, Sid! Heah's your hoss!" called one.

"Say, if you locoed gents'll hold up a little I'll tell you somethin'," replied a voice from the bluff.

"Come on, Sid! We got him corralled," said the first speaker.

"Wal, mebbe, an' if you hev it's liable to be damn hot. *Thet feller was Buck Duane!*"

Absolute silence followed that statement. Presently it was broken by a rattling of loose gravel and then low voices.

"He can't git acrost the river, I tell you," came to Duane's ears. "He's corralled in the brake. I know thet hole."

Then Duane, gliding silently and swiftly through the willows, heard no more from his pursuers. He headed straight for the river. Threading a passage through a willow brake was an old task for him.

The Rio Grande and its tributaries ran for the most of their length in Texas between wide, low, flat lands covered by a dense growth of willow, cottonwood, mesquite, prickly pear, and other growths mingled with the willow, and altogether they made a matted, tangled copse, a thicket that an inexperienced man would have considered impenetrable. From above, these wild brakes looked green and red; from the inside they were gray and yellow—a striped wall. Trails and glades were scarce. There were a few deer-runways and sometimes little paths made by the *jabali*, or wild pigs, of Mexico.

The ground was clay and unusually dry, sometimes baked so hard that it left no imprint of a track. Where a growth of cottonwood had held back the encroachment of the willows there usually was thick grass and underbrush. The willows were short, slender poles with stems so close together that they almost touched, and with the leafy foliage forming a thick covering.

The depths of this brake Duane had penetrated was a silent, dreamy, strange place. In the middle of the day the light was weird and dim. When a breeze fluttered the foliage, then slender shafts and spears of sunshine pierced the green mantle and danced like gold on the ground.

Duane had always felt the strangeness of this kind of place, and likewise he had felt a protecting, harboring something which always seemed to him to be the sympathy of the brake for a hunted

creature. It was not hard to conceal tracks; the springy soil gave forth no sound; and men could hunt each other for weeks, pass within a few yards of each other and never know it. The problem of sustaining life was difficult, but then hunted men and animals survived on very little.

Duane wanted to cross the river if that was possible, and, keeping in the brake, work his way upstream till he had reached country more hospitable. Remembering what the man had said in regard to the river, Duane had his doubts about crossing. But he would take any chance to put the river between him and his hunters. He pushed on. His left arm had to be favored, as he could scarcely move it. Using his right to spread the willows, he slipped sideways between them and made fast time.

There were narrow aisles and washes and holes low down and paths brushed by animals, all of which he took advantage of, running, walking, crawling, stooping any way to get along. To keep in a straight line was not easy—he did it by marking some bright sunlit stem or tree ahead, and when he reached it looked straight on to mark another. His progress necessarily grew slower, for as he advanced the brake became wilder, denser, darker.

He kept on without pause. Deepening shadows under the willows told him that the afternoon was far advanced. He began to fear he had wandered in a wrong direction. Finally a strip of light ahead relieved his anxiety, and after a toilsome penetration of still denser brush he broke through to the bank of the river.

He faced a wide, shallow, muddy stream with brakes on the opposite bank extending like a green and yellow wall. Duane perceived at a glance the futility of his trying to cross at this point. Everywhere the sluggish water laved quicksand bars. In fact, the bed of the river was all quicksand, and very likely there was not a foot of water anywhere. He could not swim; he could not crawl; he could not push a log across.

He seized a long pole and, reaching down from the high bank, thrust it into the stream. Right there near shore there apparently was no bottom to the treacherous quicksand. He abandoned any hope of crossing the river. Probably for miles up and down it would be just the same as here. Before leaving the bank he tied his hat upon the pole and lifted enough water to quench his thirst. Then he worked his way back to where thinner growth made advancement easier, and kept on upstream till the shadows were so deep he could not see.

Feeling around for a place big enough to stretch out on, he lay down. For the time being he was as safe there as he would have been beyond in the Rim Rock. He was tired, though not exhausted, and in spite of the throbbing pain in his arm he dropped at once into sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Cornered

SOME time during the night Duane awoke. Stillness blanketed the black willow brake. He could not see a star or a branch or tree trunk or even his hand before his eyes. He lay there waiting, listening, sure that he had been awakened

by an unusual sound. Ordinary noises of the night in the wilderness never disturbed his rest. A long low breath of slow wind moaned through the willows, passed away; some stealthy, soft-footed beast trotted by him in the darkness; there was a rustling among dry leaves; a fox barked lonesomely in the distance. But none of these sounds had broken his slumber.

Suddenly, piercing the stillness, came the bay of a bloodhound. Quickly Duane sat up, chilled to his marrow. The action made him aware of his crippled arm. Then came other bays, lower, more distant. Silence enfolded him again, all the more oppressive and menacing in his suspense. Bloodhounds had been put on his trail, and the leader was not far away. Rising to his feet, prepared to flee as best he could, he waited to be sure of the direction he should take.

The leader of the hounds broke into cry again, a deep, full-toned, ringing bay, strange, ominous, terribly significant in its power. It caused a cold sweat to ooze out all over Duane's body. He turned from it, and with his uninjured arm outstretched to feel for the willows he groped his way along. As it was impossible to pick out the narrow passages, he had to slip and squeeze and plunge between the yielding stems. He made such a crashing that he no longer heard the baying of the hounds. He had no hope to elude them. He meant to climb the first cottonwood that he stumbled upon in his blind flight. But it appeared he never was going to be lucky enough to run against one.

Often he fell, sometimes flat, at others upheld by the willows. What made the work so hard was the fact that he had only one arm to open a clump of close-growing stems and his feet would catch or tangle in the narrow crotches, holding him fast. He had to struggle desperately. It was as if the willows were clutching hands, his enemies, fiendishly impeding his progress. He tore his clothes on sharp branches and his flesh suffered many a prick. But he kept on until he brought up hard against a cottonwood tree.

There he leaned and rested. He found himself as nearly exhausted as he had ever been, wet with sweat, his hands torn and burning, his breast laboring, his legs stinging from innumerable bruises. While he leaned there to catch his breath he listened for the pursuing hounds. For a long time there was no sound from them. This, however, did not deceive him into any hopefulness. There were bloodhounds that bayed often on a trail, and others that ran mostly silent. Presently Duane's ears were filled by a chorus of short ringing yelps. The pack had found where he had slept, and now the trail was hot. Satisfied that they would soon overtake him, Duane set about climbing the cottonwood, which in his condition was difficult of ascent.

It happened to be a fairly large tree with a fork about fifteen feet up, and branches thereafter in succession. Duane climbed until he got above the enshrouding belt of blackness. A pale gray mist hung above the brake, and through it shone a line of dim lights. Duane decided these were bonfires made along the bluff to render his escape more difficult on that side. Away round in the direction he thought was north he imagined he saw more fires, but, as the mist was thick, could not be sure. While he sat there the mist and the gloom on one side lightened; and this side he concluded was east and meant that dawn was near.

He descended to the first branch of the tree.

His situation now, though still critical, did not appear to be so hopeless as it had been. The hounds would soon close in on him, and he would kill them or drive them away. It was beyond the bounds of possibility that any men could have followed running hounds through that brake in the night. The thing that worried Duane was the fact of the bonfires. He had gathered from the words of one of his pursuers that the brake was a kind of trap, and he began to believe there was only one way out of it, and that was along the bank where he had entered, and where obviously all night long his pursuers had kept fires burning. Further conjecture on this point, however, was interrupted by a crashing in the willows and the rapid patter of feet.

Underneath Duane lay a gray, foggy obscurity. He could not see the ground, nor any object but the black trunk of the tree. Sight would not be needed to tell him when the pack arrived. With a pattering rush through the willows the hounds reached the tree; and then high above crash of brush and thud of heavy paws rose a hideous clamor. Duane's pursuers far off to the south would hear that and know what it meant. And at daybreak they would take a short cut across the brake, guided by the baying of hounds that had treed their quarry.

It wanted only a few moments, however, till Duane could distinguish the vague forms of the hounds in the gray shadow below. Still he waited. He had no shots to spare, and he knew how to treat bloodhounds. Gradually the obscurity lightened, and at length Duane had good enough sight of the hounds for his purpose. His first shot killed the huge brute leader of the pack. Then, with unerring shots, he crippled several others. That stopped the baying. Piercing howls arose. The pack took fright and fled, its course easily marked by the howls of the crippled members. Duane reloaded his gun, and, making certain all the hounds had gone, he descended to the ground and set off at a rapid pace to the northward. The mist had dissolved under a rising sun when Duane made his first halt some miles north of the scene where he had waited for the hounds. A barrier to further progress, in shape of a precipitous rocky bluff, rose sheer from the willow brake. He skirted the base of the cliff, where walking was comparatively easy, around in the direction of the river. He reached the end finally to see there was absolutely no chance to escape from the brake at that corner.

It took extreme labor, attended by some hazard and considerable pain to his arm, to get down where he could fill his sombrero with water. After quenching his thirst he had a look at his wound. It was caked over with blood and dirt. When washed off the arm was seen to be inflamed and swollen around the bullet hole. He bathed it, then he bandaged it as best he could and arranged a sling round his neck. This mitigated the pain and held the injured arm in a quiet and restful position, where it had a chance to begin mending.

As Duane turned away from the river he felt refreshed. However, tramping on foot day and night was as unusual to him as to any other riders of the Southwest, and it had begun to tell on him. Retracing his steps, he reached the point where he had abruptly come upon the bluff, and

here he determined to follow along its base in the other direction until he found a way out or discovered the futility of such effort.

Duane covered ground rapidly. He was always listening, and his eyes were ever roving. This alertness had become second nature with him, so that except in extreme cases of caution he performed it while he pondered his gloomy and fateful situation.

By noon he had rounded the wide curve of the brake and was facing south. The bluff had petered out from a high, mountainous wall to a low abutment o rock, but it still held to its steep, rough nature and afforded no crack or slope where quick ascent could have been possible. He pushed on, growing warier as he approached the danger zone, finding that as he neared the river on this side it was imperative to go deeper into the willows.

In the afternoon he reached a point where he could see men pacing to and fro on the bluff. This assured him that whatever place was guarded was one by which he might escape. He headed toward these men and approached to within one hundred paces of the bluff where they were. There were several men and several boys, all armed and, after the manner of Texans, taking their task leisurely. Farther down Duane made out black dots on the horizon of the bluff-line, and these he concluded were more guards stationed at another outlet.

Duane peered through the branches and studied the lay of the land. For several hundred yards the bluff could be climbed. He took stock of those careless guards. They had rifles, and that made vain any attempt to pass them in daylight. He believed an attempt by night might be successful; and he was swiftly coming to a determination to hide there till dark and then try it, when the sudden yelping of a dog betrayed him to the guards on the bluff.

Duane saw the men run together and begin to talk excitedly and peer into the brake, which was a signal for him to slip away under the willows. He made no noise, and he assured himself he must be invisible. Nevertheless, he heard shouts, then the cracking of rifles, and bullets began to zip and swish through the leafy covert.

The day was hot and windless, and Duane concluded that whenever he touched a willow stem, even ever so slightly, it vibrated to the top and sent a quiver among the leaves. Through this the guards had located his position. Once a bullet hissed by him; another thudded into the ground before him. This shooting loosed a rage in Duane. Always in the fury of such moments he wanted to give back shot for shot. But he slipped on through the willows, and at length the rifles ceased to crack.

He sheered to the left again, in line with the rocky barrier, and kept on. He was seen by sharp-eyed scouts, and a hot fusillade drove him to run for his life, luckily to escape with no more than a bullet-creased shoulder.

Later that day, still undaunted, he sheered again toward the trap-wall, and found that the nearer he approached to the place where he had come down into the brake the greater his danger. He waited for night, and after the brightness of the fires had somewhat lessened he essayed to creep out of the brake. He succeeded in reaching the foot of the bluff, here only a bank, and had begun to crawl stealthily up under cover

of a shadow when a hound again betrayed his position.

Retreating to the willows was as perilous a task as had ever confronted Duane; and when he had accomplished it, right under what seemed a hundred blazing rifles, he felt that he had indeed been favored by Providence. This time men followed him a goodly way into the brake, and ripping of lead through the willows sounded on all sides of him.

When the noise of pursuit ceased Duane sat down in the darkness, his mind clamped between two things—whether to try again to escape or wait for possible opportunity. He seemed incapable of decision. His intelligence told him that every hour lessened his chances for escape. He had little enough chance in any case, and that was what made another attempt so desperately hard. There would come an hour, sooner or later, when he would wrench decision out of this chaos of emotion and thought. But that time was not yet.

When he had remained quiet long enough to cool off and recover from his run he found that he was tired. He stretched out to rest. But the swarms of vicious mosquitoes prevented sleep. This corner of the brake was low and near the river, a breeding-ground for the bloodsuckers. They sang and hummed and whined around him in an ever-increasing horde. He covered his head and hands with his coat and lay there patiently. That was a long and wretched night. Morning found him still strong physically, but in a dreadful state of mind.

First he hurried for the river. He could withstand the pangs of hunger, but it was imperative to quench thirst. His wound made him feverish, and therefore more than usually hot and thirsty. Again he was refreshed. That morning he was hard put to it to hold himself back from attempting to cross the river. Wearily, doggedly he faced about toward the bluff.

All that day and all that night, all the next day and all the next night, he stole like a hunted savage from river to bluff; and every hour forced upon him the bitter certainty that he was trapped.

Duane lost track of days, of events. He had come to an evil pass. There arrived an hour when, closely pressed by pursuers at the extremely southern corner of the brake, he took to a dense thicket of willows, driven to what he believed was his last stand.

If only these human bloodhounds would swiftly close in on him! Let him fight to the last bitter gasp and have it over! But these hunters, eager as they were to get him, had care of their own skins. They took few risks. They had him cornered.

It was the middle of the day, hot, dusty, oppressive, threatening storm. Duane crawled into a little space in the darkest part of the thicket and lay still. Men had cut him off from the bluff, from the river, seemingly from all sides. But he heard voices only from in front and toward his left. Even if his passage to the river had not been blocked, it might just as well have been.

"Come on, fellers—down hyar," called one man from the bluff.

"Got him corralled at last," shouted another.

"Reckon ye needn't be too shore. We thought thet more'n once," taunted another.

"I seen him, I tell you."

"Aw, thet was a deer."

"But Bill found fresh tracks an' blood on the willows."

"If he's winged we needn't hurry."

"Hold on thar, you boys," came a shout in authoritative tones from farther up the bluff. "Go slow. You-all air gittin' foolish at the end of a long chase."

"Let's surround this corner an' starve him out."

"Fire the brake."

How clearly all this talk pierced Duane's ears! In it he seemed to hear his doom. This, then, was the end he had always expected.

"By God!" whispered Duane, "the thing for me to do now—is go out—meet them!"

That was prompted by the killing instinct in him. If he must die, that was the way for him to die. He got to his knees and drew his gun. With his swollen and almost useless hand he held what spare ammunition he had left. He ought to creep out noiselessly to the edge of the willows, suddenly face his pursuers, then, while there was a beat left in his heart, kill, kill, kill. These men all had rifles. The fight would be short. But the marksman did not live on earth who could make such a fight go wholly against him. Confronting them suddenly he could kill a man for every shot in his gun.

Thus Duane reasoned. So he hoped to accept his fate—to meet this end. But when he tried to step forward something checked him. The obstruction that opposed his will was as insurmountable as it had been physically impossible for him to climb the bluff.

Slowly he fell back, crouched low, and then lay flat. The grim dignity that had been his a moment before fell away from him. He lay there stripped of his last shred of self-respect. He wondered if he was afraid; had he, the last of the Duanes—had he come to feel fear? No! Never in all his wild life had he so longed to go out and meet men face to face. It was not fear that held him back. He hated this hiding, this eternal vigilance, this hopeless life. The damnable paradox of the situation was that if he went out to meet these men there was absolutely no doubt of his doom. If he clung to his covert there was a chance, a merest chance, for his life. Duane's keenness told him that at the very darkest and most perilous moment there was still a chance for him. And the blood in him, the temper of his father, the years of his outlawry, the pride of his unsought and hated career made him accept that slim chance.

Waiting then became a physical and mental agony. He lay under the burning sun, parched by thirst, laboring to breathe, sweating and bleeding. His uncared-for wound was like a red-hot prong in his flesh. Blotched and swollen from the never-ending attack of flies and mosquitoes his face seemed twice its natural size, and it ached and stung.

On one side, then, was this physical torture; on the other the old hell, terribly augmented at this crisis, in his mind. It seemed that thought and imagination had never been so swift. If death found him presently, how would it come? Would he get decent burial? Would his people ever know where he had fallen? It was cowardly, monstrous, to cling longer to this doomed life. Then the hate in his heart, the hellish hate of these men on his trail—that was like a scourge. He felt no longer human. He had

degenerated into an animal that could think. His heart pounded, his pulse beat, his breast heaved. He was now enacting the tragedy of all crippled, starved, hunted wolves at bay in their dens. Only his tragedy was infinitely more terrible because he had mind enough to see his plight, his resemblance to a lonely wolf, snarling, fire-eyed in a last instinctive defiance.

Mounted upon the horror of Duane's thought was a watching, listening intensity so supreme that it registered impressions which were creations of his imagination. He heard stealthy steps that were not there; he saw shadowy moving figures that were only leaves. A hundred times when he was about to pull trigger he discovered his error. Yet voices came from a distance, and steps and crackings in the willows, and other sounds real enough. But Duane could not distinguish the real from the false. There were times when the wind which had arisen sent a hot, pattering breath down the willow aisles, and Duane heard it as an approaching army.

This straining of Duane's faculties brought on a reaction which in itself was a respite. He saw the sun darkened by thick slow-spreading clouds. The air was like steam. If there broke one of those dark, violent storms common though rare to the country, Duane believed he might slip away in the fury of wind and rain. Hope, that seemed unquenchable in him, surged back again. He hailed it with a bitterness that was sickening.

Then at a rustling step he froze into the old strained attention. He heard a slow patter of soft feet. A tawny shape crossed a little opening in the thicket. It was that of a dog. The moment while that beast came into full view was an age. The dog was not a bloodhound, and if he had a trail or a scent he seemed to be at fault on it. Duane waited for the inevitable discovery. Any kind of a hunting dog could have found him in that thicket. Voices from outside could be heard urging on the dog—Rover, they called him.

Duane sat up at the moment the dog entered the little shaded covert. Duane expected a yelping, a baying, or at least a bark that would tell of his hiding-place. A strange relief swiftly swayed over Duane. The end was near now. He had no further choice. Let them come—a quick, fierce exchange of shots —and then this torture past! He waited for the dog to give the alarm.

But the dog looked at him and trotted by into the thicket without a yelp. Duane could not believe the evidence of his senses. He saw the dog disappear, heard him running to and fro among the willows, getting farther and farther away, till all sound from him ceased.

"Thar's Rover," called a voice from the bluff-side. "He's been through thet black patch."

"Nary a rabbit in there," replied another.

"Bah! Thet pup's no good," scornfully growled another man. "Put a hound at thet clump of willows."

"Fire's the game. Burn the brake before the rain comes."

The voices droned off as their owners evidently walked up to the ridge.

Then upon Duane fell the crushing burden of the old waiting, watching, listening spell. After all, it was not to end just now. His chance still persisted —looked a little brighter—led him on, perhaps, to forlorn hope.

All at once twilight settled quickly down upon the willow brake. He imagined it to be caused by the approaching storm. But there was little movement of air or cloud, and thunder still muttered and rumbled at a distance. The fact was the sun had set and night was at hand.

Duane realized it with the awakening of all his old force. He would yet elude his pursuers. That was the moment when he seized the significance of all these fortunate circumstances which had aided him. Without haste and without sound he began to crawl in the direction of the river. It was not far, and he reached the bank before darkness set in.

There were men up on the bluff carrying wood to build a bonfire. For a moment he half yielded to a temptation to try to slip along the shore, close in under the willows, but when he raised himself to peer out he saw that an attempt of this kind would be liable to failure. At the same moment he saw a rough-hewn plank lying beneath him, lodged against some willows. The end of the plank extended in almost to a point beneath him. Quick as a flash he saw where a desperate chance invited him. Then he tied his gun in an oilskin bag and put it in his pocket.

The bank was steep and crumbly. He must not break off any earth to splash into the water. There was a willow growing back a few feet from the edge of the bank. Cautiously he pulled it down, bent it over the water so that when he released it there would be no springing back. Then he trusted his weight to it, with his feet sliding carefully down the bank. He went into the water almost up to his knees, felt the quicksand grip his feet; then, leaning forward till he reached the plank, he pulled it toward him and lay upon it.

Without a sound one end went slowly under water and the farther end appeared lightly braced against the overhanging willows. Very carefully then Duane began to extricate his right foot from the sucking sand. It seemed as if his foot was encased in solid rock. He pulled with all the power he dared use. It came slowly and at length was free. The left one he released with less difficulty. He put all his attention on the plank to ascertain if his weight would sink it into the sand. The far end slipped off the willows with a little splash and gradually settled to rest upon the bottom, but it sank no farther. As it was impossible for Duane to keep his head up for long he carefully crawled out upon the plank until he could rest an arm and shoulder upon the willows.

When he looked up it was to find the night strangely luminous with fires. There was a bonfire on the extreme end of the bluff, another a hundred paces beyond. A great flare extended over the brake in that direction. Duane heard a roaring on the wind and he knew his pursuers had fired the willows. The brake was dry enough, but too green to burn readily. And as for the bonfires he discovered that the men, probably having run out of wood, were keeping up the light with oil and stuff from the village.

A dozen men kept watch on the bluff scarcely fifty paces from where Duane lay concealed by the willows. They talked, cracked jokes, sang songs, and manifestly considered this outlaw-hunting a great lark. As long as the bright light lasted Duane dared not move.

Escape was now in his grasp. He felt it. And with that in his mind he

waited, strong as steel in his conviction, capable of withstanding any strain endurable by the human frame.

The wind blew in puffs, grew wilder, and roared through the willows, carrying bright sparks upward. Thunder rolled down over the river, and lightning began to flash. Then the rain fell in heavy sheets, but not steadily. The flashes of lightning and the broad flares played so incessantly that Duane could not trust himself out on the open river. Certainly the storm rather increased the watchfulness of the men on the bluff. He waited, grimly standing pain and cramp and chill.

The storm wore away as desultorily as it had come, and the long night set in. There were times when Duane thought he was paralyzed, others when he grew sick, giddy, weak from the strained posture. The first paling of the stars quickened him with a kind of wild joy. He watched them grow paler, dimmer, disappear one by one. A shadow hovered down, rested upon the river, and gradually thickened. The bonfire on the bluff showed as through a foggy veil. The watchers were mere groping dark figures

Duane began to move his legs and uninjured arm and body, and at length overcame a paralyzing stiffness. Then, digging his hand in the sand and holding the plank with his knees, he edged it out into the river. Inch by inch he advanced until clear of the willows. Looking upward, he saw the shadowy figures of the men on the bluff. He realized they ought to see him, feared that they would; but he kept on, cautiously, noiselessly, with a heart-numbing slowness.

From time to time his elbow made a little gurgle and splash in the water. Try as he might, he could not prevent this. It got to be like the hollow roar of a rapid filling his ears with mocking sound. There was a perceptible current out in the river, and it hindered straight advancement. Inch by inch he crept on, expecting to hear the bang of rifles, the spattering of bullets. He tried not to look backward, but failed. The fire appeared a little dimmer, the moving shadows a little darker.

Once the plank stuck in the sand and felt as if it were settling. Bringing feet to aid his hand, he shoved it over the treacherous place. This way he made faster progress. The obscurity of the river seemed to be enveloping him. When he looked back again the figures of the men were coalescing with the surrounding gloom, the fires were streaky, blurred patches of light. But the sky above was brighter. Dawn was not far off.

To the west all was dark. With waning strength Duane shoved the plank along, and when at last he discerned the black border of bank it came in time, he thought, to save him. He crawled out, rested till the gray dawn broke, and then headed north through the willows.

Chapter Thirteen

A Child's Testimony

HOW long Duane was traveling out of that region he never knew. But he reached familiar country and found a rancher who had before befriended him. Here his arm was attended to; he had food and sleep; and in a couple of weeks he was himself again.

When the time came for Duane to ride away on his endless trail his friend reluctantly imparted the information that some thirty miles south, near the village of Shirley, there was posted at a certain crossroad a reward for Buck Duane dead or alive. Duane had heard of such notices, but he had never seen one. His friend's reluctance and refusal to state for what particular deed this reward was offered roused Duane's curiosity. He had never been any closer to Shirley than this rancher's home. Abruptly Duane decided to ride over there and find out who wanted him dead or alive, and why.

As he started south on the road he reflected that this was the first time he had ever deliberately hunted trouble. During that last terrible flight on the lower Nueces and while he lay abed recuperating he had changed. A fixed, immutable, hopeless bitterness abode with him. He had reached the end of his rope. All the power of his mind and soul were unavailing to turn him back from his fate. That fate was to become an outlaw in every sense of the term, to be what he was credited with being. He wondered now was crime close to him?

He reasoned finally that the desperation of crime had been forced upon him, if not its motive; and that if driven, there was no limit to his possibilities. He understood now why certain outlaws returned to the scene of the crime that had outlawed them; why they took such strangely fatal chances; why life was no more to them than a breath of wind; why they rode straight into the jaws of death to confront wronged men or hunting rangers, to laugh in their very faces. It was such bitterness as his that drove these men.

Toward afternoon, from the top of a long hill, Duane saw the green fields and trees and shining roofs of a town he considered must be Shirley. And at the bottom of the hill he came upon an intersecting road. There was a placard nailed on the crossroad signpost. Duane drew rein near it and leaned close to read the faded print. $1000 REWARD FOR BUCK DUANE DEAD OR ALIVE.

Duane learned that he was wanted for the murder of Mrs. Jeff Aiken at her ranch near Shirley. The month September was named, but the date was illegible. The reward was offered by the woman's husband, whose name appeared with that of a sheriff's at the bottom of the placard.

Duane read the thing twice. When he straightened he was sick with horror, wild with passion at those misguided fools who could believe that he had harmed a woman. Then he remembered Kate Bland, and, as always when she returned to him, he quaked inwardly. Years before word had gone abroad that he had killed her, and so it was easy for men wanting to fix a crime to name him.

A dark, passionate fury possessed him. When it passed, leaving him cold, with clouded brow and piercing eye, his mind was set. Spurring his horse, he rode straight toward the village.

Shirley appeared to be a large, pretentious country town. A branch of some railroad terminated there. The main street was wide, bordered by trees and commodious houses, and many of the stores were of brick. A large plaza shaded by giant cottonwood trees occupied a central location.

Duane pulled his running horse and halted him, plunging and snorting, before group of idle men who lounged on benches in the shade of a spreading cottonwood.

How many times had Duane seen just that kind of lazy shirt-sleeved Texas group! Not often, however, had he seen such placid, lolling, good-natured men change their expression, their attitude so swiftly. They evidently took him for an unusual visitor.

He slid off his horse and threw the bridle. "I'm Buck Duane," he said, "I saw that placard—out there on a signpost. It's a damn lie! Somebody find this man Jeff Aiken. I want to see him."

His announcement was taken in absolute silence. That was the only effect he noted, for he avoided looking at these villagers. Duane felt himself overcome with emotion. There were tears in his eyes. He sat down on a bench, put his elbows on his knees and his hands to his face. This ignominy was the last straw.

Presently, however, he became aware of some kind of commotion among these villagers. He heard whisperings. low, hoarse voices, then the shuffle of rapid feet moving away. All at once a violent hand jerked his gun from its holster. When Duane rose a gaunt man, livid of face, shaking like a leaf, confronted him with his own gun.

"Hands up, thar, you Buck Duane!" he roared, waving the gun.

That was the cue for pandemonium. Duane opened his lips to speak, but if he had yelled at the top of his lungs he could not have made himself heard. In weary disgust he looked at the gaunt man, and then at the others, who were working themselves into a frenzy. He made no move, however, to hold up his hands.

The villagers surrounded him, emboldened by finding him now unarmed. Then several men lay hold of his arms and pinioned them behind his back. Resistance was useless even if Duane had had the spirit. Some one of them fetched his halter from his saddle, and with this they bound him helpless.

People were running now from the street, the stores, the houses. Old men, cowboys, clerks, boys, ranchers came on the trot. The crowd grew. The increasing clamor began to attract women as well as men. A group of girls ran up, then hung back in fright and pity.

The presence of cowboys made a difference. They split up the crowd, got to Duane, and laid hold of him with rough, business-like hands. One of them lifted his fists and roared at the frenzied mob to fall back, to stop the racket. He beat them back into a circle; but it was some little time before the hubbub quieted down so a voice could be heard.

"Shut up, will you-all?" he was yelling. "Give us a chance to hear somethin'. Easy now—soho. There ain't nobody goin' to be hurt. Thet's right; everybody quiet now. Let's see what's come off."

This cowboy, evidently one of authority, or at least one of strong personality, turned to the gaunt man who still waved Duane's gun. "Abe, put the gun down," he said. "It might go off. Here, give it to me. Now, what's wrong? Who's this roped gent, an' what's he done?"

The gaunt fellow, who appeared now about to collapse, lifted a shaking hand and pointed. "Thet thar feller—he's Buck Duane!" he panted.

An angry murmur ran through the surrounding crowd.

"The rope! The rope! Throw it over a branch! String him up!" cried an excited villager.

"Buck Duane! Buck Duane!"

"Hang him!"

The cowboy silenced these cries. "Abe, how do you know this fellow is Buck Duane?" he asked sharply.

"Why—he said so," replied the man called Abe.

"What!" came the exclamation, incredulously.

"It's a tarnal fact," panted Abe, waving his hands importantly. "He like to rid' his hoss right over us-all. Then he jumped off, says he was Buck Duane, an' he wanted to see Jeff Aiken bad."

This speech caused a second commotion as noisy though not so enduring as the first. When the cowboy, assisted by a couple of his mates, had restored order again, some one had slipped the noose-end of Duane's rope over his head.

"Up with him!" screeched a wild-eyed youth.

The mob surged closer, was shoved back by the cowboys.

"Abe, if he's Buck Duane how'n hell did you get hold of his gun?" bluntly queried the cowboy.

"Why—he set down thar—an' he kind of hid his face on his hand. An' I grabbed his gun an' got the drop on him."

What the cowboy thought of this was expressed in a laugh. His mates likewise grinned broadly. Then the leader turned to Duane.

"Stranger, I reckon you'd better speak up for yourself," he said.

That stilled the crowd as no command had done.

"I'm Buck Duane, all right," said Duane quietly. "It was this way—"

The big cowboy seemed to vibrate with a shock. All the ruddy warmth left his face; his jaw began to bulge; the corded veins in his neck stood out in knots. In an instant he had a hard, stern, strange look. He shot out a powerful hand that fastened in the front of Duane's blouse.

"Somethin' queer here. But if you're Duane you're sure in bad. Any fool ought to know that. You mean it, then?"

"Yes."

"Rode in to shoot up the town, eh? Meant to kill the man who offered a reward? Wanted to see Jeff Aiken bad, huh?"

"No," replied Duane. "Your citizen here misrepresented things. He seems a little off his head."

"Reckon he is. Somebody is, that's sure. You claim Buck Duane, then, an' all his doings?"

"I'm Duane; yes. But I won't stand for the blame of things I never did. That's why I'm here. I saw that placard out there offering the reward. Until now I never was within half a day's ride of this town. I'm blamed for what I never did. I rode in here, told who I was, asked somebody to send for Jeff Aiken."

"An' then you set down an' let this old guy throw your own gun on you?" queried the cowboy in amazement.

"I guess that's it," replied Duane.

"Well, it's powerful strange, if you're really Buck Duane."

A man elbowed his way into the circle. "It's Duane. I recognize him. I seen him in more'n one place," he said. "Sibert, you can rely on what I tell you. I don't know if he's locoed or what. But I do know he's the genuine Buck Duane."

"What do you want to see Aiken for?" asked the cowboy Sibert.

"I want to face him, to tell him I never harmed his wife."

"Why?"

"Because I'm innocent, that's all."

"Suppose we send for Aiken an' he hears you an' doesn't believe you; what then?"

"If he won't believe me—why, then my case's so bad—I'd be better off dead."

A momentary silence was broken by Sibert.

"If this isn't a queer deal! Boys, reckon we'd better send for Jeff."

"Somebody went fer him. He'll be comin' soon," replied a man.

Duane stood a head taller than the circle of curious faces. He gazed out above and beyond them. It was in this way that he chanced to see a number of women on the outskirts of the crowd. Some were old, with hard faces, like the men. Some were young and comely, and they cast fearful, pitying glances upon Duane as he stood there with that noose round his neck. Women were more human than men, Duane thought. He met eyes that dilated, seemed fascinated at his gaze, but were not averted. It was the old women who were voluble, loud in expression of their feelings.

Near the trunk of the cottonwood stood a slender woman in white. Duane's wandering glance rested upon her. Her eyes were riveted upon him.

"Thar comes Jeff Aiken now," called a man loudly.

The crowd shifted and trampled in eagerness.

Duane saw two men coming fast, one of whom, in the lead, was of stalwart build. He had a gun in his hand, and his manner was that of fierce energy.

The cowboy Sibert thrust open the jostling circle of men. "Hold on, Jeff," he called, and he blocked the man with the gun. He spoke so low Duane could not hear what he said and his form hid Aiken's face.

At this juncture the crowd spread out, closed in, and Aiken and Sibert were caught in the circle. There was a pushing forward, a pressing of many bodies, hoarse cries, and flinging hands —again the insane tumult was about to break out—the demand for an outlaw's blood, the call for a wild justice executed a thousand times before on Texas's bloody soil.

Sibert bellowed at the dark encroaching mass. The cowboys with him beat and cuffed in vain.

"Jeff, will you listen?" broke in Sibert hurriedly, his hand on the other man's arm.

Aiken nodded coolly. Duane, who had seen many men in perfect control of themselves under circumstances like these, recognized the spirit that dominated Aiken. He was white, cold, passionless. There were lines of bitter grief deep round his lips.

"Sure this's your game, Aiken," said Sibert. "But hear me a minute. Reckon there's no doubt about this man bein' Buck Duane. He seen the placard out at the crossroads. He rides in to Shirley. He says he's Buck Duane an' he's lookin' for Jeff Aiken. That's all clear enough. But here's what stumps me. Duane sits down there on the bench and lets old Abe Strickland grab his gun an' get the drop on him. More'n that, he gives me some strange talk about how if he couldn't make you believe he's innocent he'd better be dead. You see for yourself Duane ain't drunk or crazy or locoed. So I

reckon you'd better hold on till you hear what he has to say."

Then for the first time the drawn-faced, hungry-eyed giant turned his gaze upon Duane. He had intelligence which was not yet subservient to passion.

"Listen," said Duane gravely, with his eyes steady on Aiken's, "I'm Buck Duane. I never lied to any man in my life. I was forced into outlawry. I've never had a chance to leave the country. I've killed men to save my own life. I never intentionally harmed any woman. I rode thirty miles today—deliberately to see what this reward was, who made it, what for. When I read the placard I went sick to the bottom of my soul. So I rode in here to find you—to tell you this: I never saw Shirley before today. It was impossible for me to have—killed your wife. Last September I was two hundred miles north of here on the upper Nueces. I can prove that.

"Men who know me will tell you I couldn't murder a woman. I haven't any idea why such a deed should be laid at my hands. It's just wild border gossip. I have no idea what reasons you have for holding me responsible. I only know—you're wrong. You've been deceived. And see here, Aiken, I'm about broken, I guess. I don't care any more for life, for anything. If you can't look me in the eyes, man to man, and believe what I say—why, by God! you can kill me!"

Aiken heaved a great breath. "Buck Duane, whether I'm impressed or not by what you say needn't matter. You've had accusers, justly or unjustly, as will soon appear. The thing is we can prove you innocent or guilty. My girl Lucy saw my wife's assailant."

He motioned for the crowd of men to open up. "Somebody—you, Sibert—go for Lucy. That'll settle this."

Duane heard as a man in an ugly dream. The faces around him, the hum of voices, all seemed far off. His life hung by the merest thread. Yet he did not think of that so much as of the brand of a woman-murderer which might be soon sealed upon him by a frightened, imaginative child.

The crowd trooped apart and closed again. Duane caught a blurred image of a slight girl clinging to Sibert's hand. Aiken lifted the child, whispered soothingly to her not to be afraid. Then he fetched her closer to Duane.

"Lucy, tell me. Did you ever see this man before?" asked Aiken huskily and low. "Is he the one—who came in the house that day—struck you down—and dragged mama—?" Aiken's voice failed.

A lightning flash seemed to clear Duane's blurred sight. He saw a pale, sad face and violet eyes fixed upon him. No terrible moment in Duane's life ever equaled this one of silence—of suspense.

"It ain't him!" cried the child.

Then Sibert was flinging the noose off Duane's neck and unwinding the bonds round his arms. The spellbound crowd awoke to hoarse exclamations.

"See there, my locoed gents, how easy you'd hang the wrong man," burst out the cowboy, as he made the rope-end hiss. "You-all are a lot of wise rangers. Haw! haw!"

He freed Duane and thrust the bone-handled gun back in Duane's holster. "You Abe, there—reckon you pulled a stunt! But don't try the like again. And, men, I'll gamble there's a hell of a lot of

bad work Buck Duane's named for—which all he never done. Clear away there. Where's his hoss? Duane, the road's open out of Shirley."

Sibert swept the gaping watchers aside and pressed Duane toward the horse, which another cowboy held. Mechanically Duane mounted, felt a lift as he went up. Then the cowboy's hard face softened in a smile.

"I reckon it ain't uncivil of me to say—hit that road quick!" he said.

He led the horse out of the crowd. Aiken joined him, and between them they escorted Duane across the plaza. The crowd followed.

Aiken paused with his big hand on Duane's knee. In it, unconsciously probably, he still held the gun. "Duane, a word with you," he said, "I believe you're not so black as you've been painted. I wish there was time to say more. Tell me this, anyway. Do you know Ranger Captain MacNelly?"

"I do not," replied Duane in surprise.

"I met him only a week ago over in Fairfield," went on Aiken hurriedly. "He declared you never killed my wife. I didn't believe him—argued with him. We almost had hard words over it. Now—I'm sorry. The last thing he said was: 'If you ever see Duane don't kill him. Send him into my camp after dark!' He meant something strange. What—I can't say. Still, I wouldn't advise you to hunt up MacNelly's camp. He's clever. Maybe he believes there's no treachery in his new ideas of ranger tactics. I tell you for all its worth. Good-by. May God help you further as he did this day!"

Duane said good-by and touched the horse with his spurs.

Chapter Fourteen

Buck Duane's Bargain

WHEN Duane reached the crossing of the roads the name Fairfield on the signpost seemed to be the thing that tipped the oscillating balance of decision in favor of going in that direction.

He answered here to unfathomable impulse. If he had been driven to hunt up Jeff Aiken, now he was called to find this unknown ranger captain. In Duane's state of mind clear reasoning, common sense, or keenness were out of the question. He went because he felt compelled.

Dusk had fallen when he rode into Fairfield. Captain MacNelly's camp was stationed just out of the village limits on the other side, he was told.

No one except the boy Duane questioned appeared to notice his arrival. Like Shirley, the town of Fairfield was large and prosperous, compared to the innumerable hamlets dotting the vast extent of southwestern Texas. As Duane rode through, being careful to get off the main street, he heard the tolling of a church bell that was a melancholy reminder of his old home.

There did not appear to be any camp on the outskirts of the town. But as Duane sat his horse, peering around and undecided what further move to make, he caught the glint of flickering lights through the darkness. Heading toward them, he rode perhaps a quarter of a mile to come upon a grove of mesquite. The brightness of several fires made the surrounding darkness all the blacker.

Duane saw the moving forms of men and heard horses. He advanced.

"Who goes there?" came a sharp call out of the gloom.

Duane pulled his horse. The gloom was impenetrable. "One man—all alone," he replied.

"A stranger?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"I'm trying to find the ranger camp."

"You've struck it. What's your errand?"

"I want to see Captain MacNelly."

"Get down and advance. Slow. Don't move your hands. It's dark, but I can see."

Duane dismounted, and, leading his horse, slowly advanced a few paces. He saw a bright object—a gun—before he discovered the man who held it. A few more steps showed a dark figure blocking the trail. Here Duane halted.

"Come closer, stranger. Let's have a look at you," the guard ordered curtly.

Duane advanced again until he stood before the man. Here the rays of light from the fires flickered upon Duane's face.

"Reckon you're a stranger, all right. What's your name and your business with the Captain?"

Duane hesitated, pondering what best to say. "Tell Captain MacNelly I'm the man he's been asking to ride into his camp—after dark," he finally said.

The ranger bent forward to peer hard at this night visitor. His manner had been alert; now it became tense. "Come here, one of you men, quick," he called, without turning in the least towards the camp fire.

"Hello! What's up, Pickens?" came the swift reply. It was followed by a rapid thud of boots on soft ground. A dark form crossed the gleams from the firelight. Then a ranger loomed up to reach the side of the guard. Duane heard whispering, the purport of which he could not catch. The second ranger swore under his breath. Then he turned away and started back.

"Here, ranger, before you go, understand this. My visit is peaceful—friendly if you'll let it be. Mind, I was asked to come here—after dark."

Duane's clear, penetrating voice carried far. The listening rangers at the camp fire heard what he said.

"Ho, Pickens! Tell that fellow to wait," replied an authoritative voice. Then a slim figure detached itself from the dark, moving group at the camp fire and hurried out.

"Better be foxy, Cap," shouted a ranger.

"Shut up—all of you," was the reply.

This officer, obviously Captain MacNelly, soon joined the two rangers who were confronting Duane. He had no fear. He strode stráight up to Duane. "I'm MacNelly," he said. "If you're my man, don't mention your name—yet."

"I met Jeff Aiken today," said Duane. "He sent me—"

"You've met Aiken!" exclaimed MacNelly, sharp, eager, low. "By all that's bully!" Then he appeared to catch himself, to grow restrained. "Men, fall back, leave us alone a moment."

The rangers slowly withdrew.

"Buck Duane! It's you?" he whispered eagerly.

"Yes."

"If I give my word you'll not be arrested—you'll be treated fairly—will

you come into camp and consult with me?"

"Certainly."

"Duane, I'm sure glad to meet you," went on MacNelly, and he extended his hand.

Amazed and touched, Duane gave his hand and felt a grip of unmistakable warmth.

"It doesn't seem natural, Captain MacNelly, but I believe I'm glad to meet you," said Duane soberly.

"You will be. Now we'll go back to camp. Keep your identity mum for the present." He led Duane in the direction of the camp fire. "Pickens, go back on duty," he ordered, "and Beeson, you look after this horse."

When Duane got beyond the line of mesquite, which had hid a good view of the camp site, he saw a group of perhaps fifteen rangers sitting around the fires, near a long low shed where horses were feeding, and a small adobe house at one side.

"We've just had grub, but I'll see you get some—then we'll talk," said MacNelly. "I've taken up temporary quarters here. Have a rustler job on hand. Now, when you've eaten, come right into the house."

Duane was hungry, but he hurried through the ample supper that was set before him, urged on by curiosity and astonishment. The only way he could account for his presence there in a ranger's camp was that MacNelly hoped to get useful information out of him. Still, that would hardly have made this captain so eager.

While eating Duane bent keen eyes around him. After a first quiet scrutiny the rangers apparently paid no more attention to him. They were all veterans in service—Duane saw that—and rugged, powerful men. Despite the occasional joke and sally of the more youthful members, and a general conversation of camp-fire nature, Duane was not deceived about the fact that his advent had been an unusual and striking one, which had caused an undercurrent of conjecture and even consternation among them. If they had not deliberately attempted to be oblivious of his presence Duane would have concluded they thought him an ordinary visitor, somehow of use to MacNelly. As it was, Duane felt a suspense that must have been due to a hint of his identity.

He was not long in presenting himself at the door of the house.

"Come in and have a chair," said MacNelly, motioning for the one other occupant of the room to rise. "Leave us, Russell, and close the door. I'll be through these reports right off."

MacNelly sat at a table upon which was a lamp and various papers. Seen in the light he was a fine-looking, soldierly man of about forty years, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a bronzed face, shrewd, stern, strong, yet not wanting in kindliness. He scanned hastily over some papers, fussed with them, and finally put them in envelopes. Without looking up he pushed a cigar case toward Duane, and upon Duane's refusal to smoke he took a cigar, rose to light it at the lamp chimney, and then, settling back in his chair, he faced Duane, making a vain attempt to hide what must have been the fulfilment of a long-nourished curiosity.

"Duane, I've been hoping for this for two years," he began.

Duane smiled a little—a smile that felt strange on his face. He had never

been much of a talker, and speech here seemed more than ordinarily difficult.

MacNelly looked long and earnestly at Duane, and his quick, nervous manner changed to grave thoughtfulness. "I've lots to say, but where to begin?" he mused. "Duane, you've had a hard life since you went on the dodge. I never met you before, don't know what you looked like as a boy. But I can see what—well, even ranger life isn't all roses."

He rolled his cigar between his lips and puffed clouds of smoke. "Ever hear from home since you left Wellston?" he asked abruptly.

"No."

"Never a word?"

"Not one," replied Duane sadly.

"That's tough. I'm glad to be able to tell you that up to just lately your mother, sister, uncle—all your folks, I believe—were well. I've kept posted, but haven't heard lately."

Duane averted his face a moment, hesitated till the swelling left his throat, and then said, "It's worth what I went through today to hear that."

"I can imagine how you feel about it. When I was in the war—but let's get down to the business of this meeting." He pulled his chair close to Duane's. "You've had word more than once in the last two years that I wanted to see you?"

"Three times, I remember," replied Duane.

"Why didn't you hunt me up?"

"I supposed you imagined me one of those gun-fighters who couldn't take a dare and expected me to ride up to your camp and be arrested."

"That was natural, I suppose," went on MacNelly. "You didn't know me, otherwise you would have come. I've been a long time getting to you. But the nature of my job, as far as you're concerned, made me cautious. Duane, you're aware of the hard name you bear all over the South-west?"

"Once in a while I'm jarred into realizing," replied Duane.

"It's the hardest, barring Murrell and Cheseldine, on the Texas border. But there's this difference—Murrell in his day was known to deserve his infamous name. Cheseldine also. But I've found hundreds of men in south-west Texas who're your friends, who swear you never committed a crime. The farther south I get the clearer this becomes. What I want to know is the truth. Have you ever done anything criminal? Tell me the truth, Duane. It won't make any difference in my plan. And when I say crime, I mean what *I* call crime, or any reasonable Texan."

"That way my hands are clean," replied Duane.

"You never held up a man, robbed a store for grub, stole a horse when you needed him bad—never anything like that?"

"Somehow I always kept out of that, just when pressed the hardest."

"Duane, I'm damn glad!" MacNelly exclaimed, gripping Duane's hand. "Glad for your mother's sake! But, all the same, in spite of this, you are a Texas outlaw accountable to the state. You're perfectly aware that under existing circumstances, if you *fell* into the hands of the law, you'd probably hang—at least go to jail for a long term."

"That's what kept me on the dodge all these years," replied Duane.

"Certainly." MacNelly removed his cigar. His eyes narrowed and glittered. The muscles along his brown cheeks

set hard and tense. He leaned closer to Duane, laid sinewy, pressing fingers upon Duane's knee.

"Listen to this," he whispered hoarsely. "If I place a pardon in your hand—make you a free, honest citizen once more, clear your name of infamy, make your mother, your sister proud of you—will you swear yourself to a service, *any* service I demand of you?"

Duane sat stock-still, stunned.

Slowly, more persuasively, with show of earnest agitation, Captain MacNelly reiterated his startling query.

"My God!" burst from Duane. "What's this? MacNelly, you *can't* be in earnest!"

"Never more so in my life. I've a deep game. I'm playing it square. What do you say?"

He rose to his feet. Duane, as if impelled, rose with him. In MacNelly's eyes Duane read truth, strong, fiery purpose, hope, even gladness, and a mounting assurance of victory.

Twice Duane endeavoured to speak, failed of all save a hoarse, incoherent sound, until, forcing back a flood of speech, he found a voice. "Any service? *Every* service! MacNelly, I give my word."

A light played over MacNelly's face, warming out all the grim darkness. He held out his hand. Duane met it with his in a clasp that men unconsciously give in moments of stress.

When Duane stepped back to drop into a chair MacNelly fumbled for another cigar—he had bitten the other into shreds—and, lighting it as before, he turned to his visitor, now calm and cool. He had the look of a man who had justly won something at considerable cost. His next move was to take a long leather case from his pocket and extract from it several folded papers.

"Here's your pardon from the Governor," he said quietly. "You'll see, when you look it over, that it's conditional. When you sign this paper I have here the condition will be met." He smoothed out the paper, handed Duane a pen, ran his forefinger along a dotted line.

Duane's hand was shaky. Years had passed since he had held a pen. It was with difficulty that he achieved his signature. *Buckley Duane*—how strange the name looked!

"Right here ends the career of Buck Duane, outlaw and gun-fighter," said MacNelly, and, seating himself, he took the pen from Duane's fingers and wrote several lines in several places upon the paper. Then with a smile he handed it to Duane. "That makes you a member of Company A, Texas Rangers."

"So that's it!" burst out Duane, a light breaking in upon his bewilderment. "You want me for ranger service?"

"Sure—that's it," replied the Captain dryly. "Now to hear what that service is to be. I've been a busy man since I took this job, and, as you may have heard, I've done a few things. I don't mind telling you that political influence put me in here and that up Austin way there's a good deal of friction in regard to whether or not the ranger service is any good—whether it should be discontinued or not. I'm on the side who's defending the ranger service. I contend that it's made Texas habitable. Well, it's been up to me to produce results. So far I have been successful.

"My great ambition is to break up the outlaw gangs along the river. I have never ventured in there yet because I've been waiting to get the lieutenant I needed. You, of course are the man

I had in mind. It's my idea to start way up the Rio Grande and begin with Cheseldine. He's the strongest, the worst outlaw of the times. He's more than rustler. It's Cheseldine and his gang who are operating on the banks. That's my private opinion, but it's not been backed up by any evidence. Cheseldine doesn't leave evidence. He's intelligent, cunning. No one seems to have seen him—to know what he looks like.

"I assume, of course, that you are a stranger to the country he dominates. It's five hundred miles west of your ground. There's a little town over there called Fairdale. It's the nest of a rustler gang. They rustle and murder at will. Nobody knows who the leader is. I want you to find out. Well, whatever way you decide is best you will proceed to act upon. You are your own boss. You know such men and how they can be approached. You will take all the time needed, if it's months. It will be necessary for you to communicate with me, and that will be a difficult matter, for Cheseldine dominates several whole counties. You must find some way to let me know when I and my rangers are needed.

"The plan is to break up Cheseldine's gang—the toughest job on the border. Arresting him alone isn't to be heard of. He couldn't be brought out. Killing him isn't much better, for his select men, the ones he operates with, are as dangerous to the community as he is. We want to kill or jail this choice selection of robbers and break up the rest of the gang. To find them, to get among them somehow, to learn their movements, to lay your trap for us rangers to spring—that, Duane, is your service to me, and God knows it's a great one!"

"I have accepted it," replied Duane.

"Your work will be secret. You are now a ranger in my service. But no one except the few I choose to tell will know of it until we pull off the job. You will simply be Buck Duane till it suits our purpose to acquaint Texans with the fact that you're a ranger. You'll see there's no date on that paper. No one will ever know just when you entered the service. Perhaps we can make it appear that all or most of your outlawry has really been good service to the state. At that, I believe it'll turn out so."

MacNelly paused a moment in his rapid talk, chewed his cigar, drew his brows together in a dark frown, and went on. "No man on the border knows so well as you the deadly nature of this service. It's a thousand to one that you'll be killed. I'd say there was no chance at all for any other man beside you. Your reputation will go far among the outlaws. Maybe that and your nerve and your gunplay will pull you through. I'm hoping so. But it's a long, long chance against your ever coming back."

"That's not the point," said Duane. "But in case I get killed out there—what—"

"Leave that to me," interrupted Captain MacNelly. "Your folks will know at once of your pardon and your ranger duty. If you lose your life out there I'll see your name cleared—the service you render known. You can rest assured of that."

"I am satisfied," replied Duane. "That's so much more than I dared to hope."

"Well, it's settled, then. I'll give you money for expenses. You'll start as soon as you like—the sooner the better. I hope to think of other suggestions, especially about communicating with me."

Long after the lights were out and the low hum of voices had ceased round the camp fire Duane lay wide awake, eyes staring into the blackness, marveling over the strange events of the day. He was humble, grateful to the depths of his soul. A huge and crushing burden had been lifted from his heart. He welcomed this hazardous service to the man who had saved him.

Thought of his mother and sister and Uncle Jim, of his home, of old friends, came rushing over him. For the first time in years he had happiness in the memory. The disgrace he had put upon them would now be removed; and in the light of that, his wasted life of the past, and its probable tragic end in future service as atonement changed their aspects. And as he lay there, with the approach of sleep finally dimming the vividness of his thought, shadowy faces floated in the blackness around him, haunting him as he had always been haunted.

It was broad daylight when he awakened. MacNelly was calling him to breakfast. Outside sounded the voices of men, crackling of fires, snorting and stamping of horses, the barking of dogs. Duane rolled out of his blankets and made good use of the soap and towel and razor and brush.

Then he stepped to the door and went out. The rangers were eating in a circle round a tarpaulin spread upon the ground.

"Fellows," said MacNelly, "shake hands with Buck Duane. He's on secret ranger service for me. Service that'll likely make you all hump soon! Mind you, keep mum about it."

The rangers surprised Duane with a roaring greeting, the warmth of which he soon divined was divided between pride of his acquisition to their ranks and eagerness to meet that violent service of which their captain hinted. They were jolly, wild fellows, with just enough gravity in their welcome to show Duane their respect and appreciation, while not forgetting his lone-wolf record. When he had seated himself in that circle—now one of them—a feeling subtle and uplifting pervaded him.

After the meal Captain MacNelly drew Duane aside. "Here's the money. Make it go as far as you can. Better strike straight for El Paso, snook around there and hear things. Then go to Valentine. That's near the river and within fifty miles or so of the edge of the Rim Rock. Somewhere up there Cheseldine holds fort. Somewhere to the north is the town Fairdale. He doesn't hide all the time in the rocks—only after some daring raid or holdup.

"Cheseldine's got border towns on his staff, or scared of him, and these places we want to know about, especially Fairdale. Write me care of the adjutant at Austin. I don't have to warn you to be careful where you mail letters. Ride a hundred, two hundred miles, if necessary, or go clear to El Paso."

MacNelly stopped with an air of finality, and then Duane slowly rose.

"I'll start at once," he said, extending his hand to the Captain. "I wish—I'd like to thank you!"

"Hell, man! Don't thank me!" replied MacNelly, crushing the proffered hand. "I've sent a lot of good men to their deaths, and maybe you're another. But, as I've said, you've one chance in a thousand, And, by heaven, I'd hate to be Cheseldine or any other man you were trailing! No, no good-by—*adios*, Duane! May we meet again!"

THE END

SAM BASS

Story by CARL SMITH *Pictures by* DAN MULLER

HERE IS THE SAGA, *in pictures, of Sam Bass, whom song and story have made one of the best-known desperadoes of the West. His career of outlawry, beginning with the holdup of the Union Pacific in Nebraska, was a brief but notable one, immortalized in that old ballad the first line of which informs us that he "was born in Indiana, it was his native home." But for the treachery of a member of his own gang, the stocky bandit with the drawling speech and good-humored grin might have lived a little longer—and there might have been no ballad.*

The six masked men who boarded a U.P. train at Big Springs, near Ogallala, Nebraska, in the fall of 1877 executed one of the boldest train robberies in history, making a clean getaway with $60,000 in newly minted $20 gold pieces. One of the gang was Sam Bass, a young Texas cowboy whose exploits, recorded in ballad and in story, made him almost as notorious as Jesse James.

The U.P. holdup was his first train robbery, and Sam was the only one of the six who survived to plague the authorities. Three were soon killed, and two others disappeared, never to be seen again. Returning to Texas, Sam organized a band of outlaws who robbed trains and eluded their pursuers with maddening ease.

The beginning of the end for Sam Bass came when his band met Captain June Peak's company of Rangers. One of Sam's best men was killed, and among the captured outlaws was one Jim Murphy, who was to become Sam Bass's Judas. The demoralized outlaws holed up in northern Texas to lick their wounds.

General John B. Jones, commander of the Texas Rangers, made a deal with Murphy. "I'll furnish bail for your hearing at Tyler," said the General. "Jump your bail, and I'll advertise you as a wanted man. Rejoin Bass, arrange for me to capture him—and you'll be a free man."

Everything went according to schedule. Murphy found Sam and two companions preparing to flee to Mexico. One of the men suspected Murphy's treachery, and they were about to shoot him when Frank Jackson, who had been a boyhood friend of Murphy's, vouched for his loyalty and saved him. Remember Jackson.

Bass and his companions moved southward. They lacked money, so decided to rob a bank to provide escape funds. Figuring that Waco was too tough, they settled on Round Rock, a small town near Austin, the state capital. Murphy managed to mail a note to General Jones, who was in Austin.

Jones received the note the next day. Only four Rangers were detailed in Austin as the capital guard, the nearest company being at San Saba, 115 miles away. Corporal Wilson started out for San Saba with orders to spare neither himself nor his horse. Wilson ran the mare to death that night.

However, he reached San Saba the next day, and Lieutenant Reynolds and eight men began a day-and-night ride to Round Rock. Meanwhile, Bass and his men completed their plans for the holdup. They strolled into Round Rock to make final inspection. Cagily, Murphy separated himself from the others.

General Jones had warned the sheriff and his men to play it safe until the Rangers arrived. But a deputy named Grimes, noticing a group of strangers in a store, stepped toward them and said to one, "I think you're carrying a pistol, stranger." Bass drew his gun and answered, "Yes, of course I am."

Whereupon he shot Grimes dead. Another deputy named Moore went for his gun—and was shot before the revolver cleared leather. Bass, Jackson, and Barnes then made a dash for their horses. In a barber shop near by was Private Dick Ware, one of the small contingent of Rangers from Austin.

As he heard the gunfire, Ware leaped from the chair in which he was being shaved and ran into the street, drawing his long-barreled .45 Colt's. As Ware singlehanded battled with the three outlaws, the boom of his gun brought General Jones to the scene, and he joined in with a light pistol.

There arose a clatter of gunfire as Round Rock citizens pitched into the fight with six-shooters, shotguns, and rifles. Barnes went down. Bass was wounded as they fought toward the horses. Jackson, who now realized they had been betrayed by Murphy, whom he had persuaded Bass to trust, proved his bravery.

With revolver in one hand, Jackson held off pursuers while he unhitched Bass's horse as well as his own. He helped his wounded leader into the saddle, and they galloped from town. Lieutenant Reynolds's Rangers, just arriving from San Saba, narrowly missed intercepting the pair, and joined the pursuit.

The pursuers lost the trail as night fell. However, Rangers scouring the countryside the next morning came upon the figure of Sam Bass, stretched beneath a tree. A bullet from Private Dick Ware's .45 had hit him in the stomach, glanced from a rib, and torn him apart inside. He was still alive, but mortally hurt.

Knowing he was done for, he had pursuaded Jackson to leave him there and make his escape. They took him to Round Rock and tried in vain to save his life. General Jones asked him where the gang got tips, who helped them hide, who were still at large. "Guess I'll just die without bothering my friends," said Sam—and he did.

Sam Bass died on his 27th birthday, and a few weeks later his betrayer, Jim Murphy, committed suicide. Frank Jackson made good his escape, and was never seen again under that name, although legend had him turning up in dozens of places for several years. Sam was buried near Round Rock, under a headstone that told in a few words the tragedy of his short life:

SAMUEL BASS
Born July 21, 1851
Died July 21, 1878
A brave man reposes in death here. Why was he not true?

Ranger Luck

By Eugene Cunningham

RANGER SERGEANT BURR DALEY *has two ambitions: to buy the Rocking Chair outfit, and to wed dark, lovely Lou Barron. But, with $50 in cash to his name, and with big, handsome Alf Quern furnishing formidable competition, Burr's prospects are not bright. Then Mig' Aranda's lucky piece comes into Burr's possession, and things start breaking his way! This action-highlighted tale was written especially for* ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE *by the author of the popular "Ware's Kid" yarns.*

BURR DALEY checked sorrel King at the top of Sad Woman Pass. Outwardly he was all that a young Ranger should be, in clothes and horse-furnishings. But inwardly—

His smooth, brown face hardened as he looked back savagely across the rolling miles of Three-Bars range. Behind him was old Ab Barron's house—and Lou Barron.

"What'd I have to come back for?" he demanded of King. "I was doing all right down at Verde with the company. If I saw a lot of pretty girls, well! I could see 'em without coming ears-over tin cup and chewing gravel. One

was as pretty as another and when they hurrahed me, I could just hurrah 'em back. Didn't mean a thing, to them or me. Right here—" brown fingers tapped the sleek stock of the carbine scabbarded beneath his leg "—was my *querida!* Then I had to ask Cap'n Ladd for this Blanco detail. Had to come back home. Had to find Lou—the way she is now. *Amor de dios!* The way she is now—"

Grim face and narrowed blue eyes softened as he thought of the Three-Bars' dark, lovely crown princess.

Those five years away from Blanco County, which had changed him from a reckless kid bronc' twister to a Ranger sergeant well known from success in twenty difficult, dangerous details, had worked pure marvels in Lou Barron. The skinny tomboy of fifteen who, in flannel shirt and faded overalls and rusty puncher boots, had ridden hellbent with him across the range, was now completely the Young Lady. More! She was entirely aware of her effect upon men, particularly upon Burr Daley and—

"Alf Quern!" Burr snarled, so suddenly and so viciously that King jumped —as he would never have jumped at sound of a shot. "Dude Alf! Big—good-looking — rich — strutting — deputy sheriff — and damn' good man."

Blanco County expected Lou to marry Alf Quern after a proper time of reigning as belle of the neighborhood. Burr had heard as much from the moment of return, before he had seen the new Lou and, in his own phrase, handed over his scalp. He had owned but one slim reason for hope; for all his good looks, his status as top hand of the Blanco country, his father's cow kingdom, Alf had no more promise from Lou than —Burr Daley, who had nothing whatever to offer a rich man's daughter but vague hopes for the future. Unless, tonight at Blanco's annual dance, she should say yes to that question Alf had been asking for two years. . . .

Burr lifted the split-reins and King took the Pass at his rocking-chair foxtrot, leaving his rider all too free to follow his gloomy train of thought.

With no real reason to expect it, he *had* expected to take Lou to the dance. It was the region's biggest celebration. It owned a tradition so set through the years that a girl thought long and long before she went to Blanco Fiesta with a man whom she was not willing to marry—even ready to marry immediately. Knowing all this, Lou had not waited to be asked by him. No! She had "already promised Alf to go with him."

"Calm as calm about it, too!" Burr reminded himself. "Alf came by yesterday early—how could she know I was going? nobody knew but what I was working a case. Why, she acted like it was my fault I got that fool yarn about Charley Ponnell being seen around the T-up-and-Down and wasted three whole days chasing that o'n'ry chuckline rider! Wish I hadn't come back here and seen her again. Anyway—almost wish I hadn't—"

King went down-slope toward that handful of gray-brown *adobes* which made the tiny village of Tres Jacales —"Three Shacks." Coming abreast the largest house, where fat Juan Terras and his fatter son Juancito grew richer year by year from liquor, monte games, dances, the simple groceries and dry goods needed by Mexican farmer and rancher, Burr looked sharply, if automatically, at the half-dozen horses, the

two rickety wagons, in sight. All were obviously of Mexican ownership, so he made no stop.

Frio Sill's Circle-S was Burr's headquarters for the time being. But Burr thought grimly that his time here was short. Old Sheriff Wall was riding again. The Hoy brothers were safe under lock and key in Blanco jail, with evidence of their guilt in the county attorney's hands. The smoothest, most mysterious case of rustling in Burr's experience was finished, and sheriff and county attorney had written Captain Ladd that complete credit was due Sergeant Daley. If tricky, murderous Charley Ponnell was still in the country, or stupid enough to come back, the sheriff and Alf Quern could loop him.

Burr turned from the Blanco road into the Circle-S gate. King broke into a lope as he saw the low *'dobe* house ahead. When he rounded the corrals and stopped, Mig' Aranda straightened where he had been dozing in the feed-room door. He yawned and waggled a limp hand, yawned again. He and Burr were lifelong acquaintances.

"Anybody home? "Burr asked him, and Mig' shook his head.

"Nobody. The *patron* and *patrona* are in town. Jim and Turkey Track are in the north pasture. The *patron* has unloaded those bull calves. *I* am looking for the post-hole digger, that I may mend the fence by the great road."

He leaned comfortably and watched Burr unsaddle. When King was comfortable in the corral, snorting over Circle-S hay, Burr carried saddle, bridle, and blanket to the harness room. He came back to hunker near Mig's seat and roll a cigarette.

In his mind, Burr turned over what was more vague hope than plan, as he had done several times in the past few days—since hearing old Colorado Bittner talk of selling or leasing that neat, prospering outfit, the Rocking Chair. Colorado was tired of what he called "widowering" and wanted to go up to Fort Worth and live with his married daughter. Fifteen thousand he considered a fair price; five thousand a fair down-payment. . . .

But, Burr wondered, *would Colorado consider some sort of manager-partner proposition?*

If his candidate happened to be a pure-minded, honest young top-hand cowpunch that's right now a Ranger sergeant? Burr asked himself, with lift of one mouth-corner, half humorous, half grim. *This aforesaid candidate mentioned in the indictment owning besides his clothes and saddle and horse and guns not five thousand dollars, but just about* five *thousand cents!*

Then he looked jerkily at Mig's thin, shrewd face. The *vaquero's* black eyes had rolled to him, narrowed, intent.

"I said that Luck, it is a strange thing—is it not truth? Consider, old friend: One man—to him comes everything that he could want, while he does nothing to bring it. But his neighbor —*ay de mi!* He goes through life as if ten grinning devils of misfortune perched behind him always upon the cantle of his saddle!" Mig sighed and shook his shock-head. But the shrewd eyes never wavered in their stare at Burr.

"Don Alf Quern, now—for all his life he has had good fortune. A man of size and handsomeness and riches, Don Alf! One to catch the eyes of the pretty girls. Now that he works no longer with his father upon the Bar-B-Q

he can wear the beaver Stetson, the shirt of red silk, the kid boots. Even his badge as the good sheriff's deputy, it is of gold!"

Tiny puffs of smoke rose like a string of bubbles from Burr's cigarette. He looked down at his neat blue flannel shirt, his gray woolen trousers, his plain tan boots. Certainly there was nothing of the dude about him. Nothing that he knew about his five-nine of height, one-fifty of weight, "to catch the eyes of the pretty girls—" Then he shrugged.

"You were right lucky, yourself, last week," he drawled. "I sort of figured we'd have the job of burying you, Miggy, when Pedro Serrano started to halve you. But his dagger just glanced off that *peso* in your shirt pocket."

"I knew that it would not hurt me —Pedro's dagger," Mig' said calmly. "*Mira!* Look! My talisman."

From a pocket he got out a bit of grayish metal, flat, kidney-shaped, much like the tap a shoemaker puts on a run-over heel. He held it out and Burr took the thing mechanically.

"It is an ancient charm of the people of my uncle, who gave it to me before he died last month. Once, many years ago, that talisman belonged to the Second Chief of the Eight Yaqui Villages on the Rio Yaqui in Sonora. It has brought me luck, my friend: I win at monte where I used to feed the gamblers. Maria is not so quick to look at men other than her husband. Pedro Serrano's dagger did not so much as gash my skin—"

Burr grinned, if twistedly. Luck—It occurred to him that he could use a tolerable supply of the commodity. But it would have to be a bigger *leopoldina* than this thing of Mig's that would give him the one thing in the world he wanted!

This wouldn't be big enough for my needings, he told himself. *Uh-uh—not if it was as wide and long as a hay-barn door!*

He handed it back and flipped away the butt of his cigarette. As he began to roll another, he stared out across the greasewood and mesquite to the low crests of the Blancos. As well go back to Verde and see if Captain Ladd could give him another detail—one hard enough, risky enough, to crowd a slim, dark, lovely girl out of a fool Ranger's mind. If no letter came from the captain, he would wire him.

Mig' was right: Alf Quern was handsome enough to swing almost any girl his way. He had the ways of a man, too, even if he had not been able to loop the clever, careful Hoys and Charley Ponnell. That work had needed the training, the "puzzle-buster" instinct, of a veteran man-hunter. Plus luck, too, Burr admitted.

"Burr!" Mig' called loudly. "I said that I need ten dollars today and—" he grinned "—does this, my charm, give me the luck that you have so much to lend me? Consider! I will let you hold the talisman until I have broken this monte game at Tres Jacales and given you the money again! While you carry it—this is a virtue of the thing—you will have the luck, as if it belonged to you."

"'*Sta bien!* I'll let you take ten—but not because I believe your yarn, Miggy. I'll take charge of the charm, too. But don't you think for one *chiquito* minute that I put my trust in it to pull you back with the ten—uh-uh! I've got a lot more faith in that Winchester of mine. I can do magic with her!"

"Tomorrow! No later than tomorrow I will give back to you the ten dollars

and take the talisman again. Now, I must catch up that *grulla* horse of mine and—"

"How about the post poles? You were hunting the digger."

"I have bethought me—the digger, it is broken. But I can fix it and dig the holes before the *patron* comes home. Ah, yes! Tomorrow. Now, old friend, *adios!* Until tomorrow!"

Burr laughed and watched him go with the two five-dollar bills. He dropped the bit of metal into a pocket of his trousers and moved toward the kitchen door. Inside, Maria, Mig's pretty sixteen-year-old wife, smiled at him from the table where she kneaded bread. Burr spoke to her and went straight on through the house. Not for him the slightest misunderstanding with Mig' the jealous, the quick-handed—and Maria would flirt with a corral post. He crossed the big front room and went out to make himself comfortable in the deep gallery, where he could smoke and look toward the road and think gloomily about Lou Barron.

A long half hour dragged by; then he saw Sheriff Wall's red-wheeled buckboard turn into the Circle-S gate. The matched pintos whirled at the gallery-end and Sheriff Wall lifted his hand to Burr.

"Hi, cowboy!" he called cheerfully. "Mighty fine to be out again. Thought them damn' rheumatics had me hobbled for keeps, this time. But now I'm up, I aim to stay up. Busy?"

"No more business than a road-runner," Burr assured him. "Light and rest your saddle. Better stay for supper. I'm plain orphan this evening, both sides the house. Fine to have you."

"Nah, I got to git along and git a confession off my shiny old black soul. I—well—" he shook his grizzled head, lean, furrowed face a frowning, worried mask "—I done a mighty, mighty dirty trick to a mighty sweet girl and I might's well go on to the Three-Bars and confess and collect my combing."

"Dirty trick? Girl? Three-Bars?" Burr grunted, leaning forward. "Uh—Lou? You talking about Lou?"

"Uh-huh. You see, Burr, her and Alf aimed to trip the light fandango like the book says tonight at the dance. Then I got word about a bad cutting scrape over at San Andres and likely more trouble coming out of it and—well, I had to send Alf to take care of things and that leaves poor li'l' Lou kind of hanging on a limb, unless— Say! Could you take her, cowboy?"

"You make just one move with your littlest finger, before I land back here with my hair in a braid and I—I'll shoot you plumb in two with Frio Sill's old buffalo Sharps!" Burr yelled over-shoulder, as he ran toward the corral. "Right with you!"

Something like five minutes later he sent King up to the buckboard. The pintos wheeled back toward the gate and Burr, reaching into a pocket for a match, felt metal. "By Gemini!" he breathed. "Miggy! I wonder!"

"Ain't going to the Bars," Sheriff Wall told him, staring solemnly straight over the pintos' ears. "Uh—reckon no need of that, now. But I'll side you far as Tres Jacales. Take a look around Terras's dive. What you 'low about Charley Ponnell, Burr? I was hoping that tale about him using around the Tees was straight. But I reckon he's on the safe side the Bravo. *Por dios!* If Charley knows what's the real what, he won't show up around this Blanco

country no more. Alf, he's no detective like you, but he'll tie into a buzz-saw and give it the first whirl. Good with a hog-leg, too. Good as Charley—or even you."

"Better'n either one of us with a short gun," Burr conceded honestly, if without interest. "Winchester is *my* fiddle—"

There was a great deal of noise in the Terras place as they came toward it. A hundred yards away the sheriff pulled in. Automatically his big hand slid under his coat as they listened to yells and crashes as of bottles breaking —then the flat crash of shots.

Burr's hand was thumb-hooked in his cartridge belt over the walnut butt of his Colt when a stocky man backed out of Terras's side door, the pistol in his right hand held at elbow level. Behind him a black horse stood "tied to the ground."

The pistol bellowed twice, sending lead into Terras's. With sight of Charley Ponnell, Sheriff Wall whipped out his Colt and Burr ignored his—to draw with the smooth speed of long experience the carbine from its scabbard. Ponnell was almost at the black horse now. His head swung far right. toward the pair of them. His pistol flicked their way. Burr saw the smoke of a shot and another.

He couldn't hit a barn door from inside at that range with a cutter! was his flashing thought as the Winchester came up to his shoulder. Then—all things coming at once—

There was the *whang!* of metal striking metal. The pintos jumped sideways and one tried to cakewalk on his hind legs. He cannoned into King and the sorrel stumbled. Burr heard the sheriff's oath of heartfelt fury as he snatched at the saddle horn and cleared his feet of the stirrups and both heard and felt the *rap!* of the bullet that plowed through his hat-crown and ruffled his hair.

He was on the ground, then, jumping away from King, bringing up the carbine again. Ponnell had flung himself into the saddle and leaned far forward to get his dangling reins. Burr snapped down the lever, snapped it up again, and squeezed the trigger as he caught the black's head in the sights.

With the shot—and before he could fire again—the little horse crumpled as if his legs were melting. He came sideways and down. Ponnell was pinned beneath him, on Burr's side of the horse. He worked furiously to clear himself but Burr, mounting without touching stirrups, yelled a warning.

He rode warily up to his prisoner, saw Ponnell's dropped Colt on the ground ten feet from the dead horse, and grinned as he looked at the vicious, twisted face.

"Charley," he said cheerfully, "I do declare, I never saw you looking better! Something bothering you, cow-boy? Oh, I see! The li'l' horse. If you'll stay right where you are, Charley, old-timer, I'll see if I can't help you out. Yes, siree, Bobuel! I'll do more: I'll see that you get to your friends so's not to be lonesome—you know, the Hoys. A' right, Sheriff—got him covered? I'll see what we can do about his sad, sad case."

He jammed the carbine back into the scabbard, got down his rope and, as the customers of Terras came cautiously out to watch, tossed a small loop over Ponnell's saddle horn, dallying the *riata* short, almost directly over the tightened loop. King pulled steadily and Ponnell rolled clear, to stand sullenly

with lifted hands at the sheriff's grim order.

Burr searched him deftly and found only a stock-knife upon him. The Terrases, father and son, stood like two grinning idols by the buckboard to tell their brief story.

"He thought that all feared him," Juan Terras said sardonically. "So he thought it easy to rob the little monte game. But Miguel Aranda had been drinking my new *tequila*, which is very strong, and so he was brave to throw a bottle at Charley. That made others brave to throw many bottles and benches; and so he went backward through the door and from it shot at us and—*se acabo! Concluido!* That is all. But when I saw your horses jump and Don Burr's horse stumble and his hat struck—*Chihuahua!* It was in my mind that we had business for the coroner!"

"Slug hit the tongue and the horses must've been nicked by splinters," the sheriff told Burr. "You know, you certainly had Ranger luck that time. If King hadn't made you duck low, that one that got your John B. would just have bored you plumb center. Instead, you can tell Cap' Ladd you made a plumb clean-up of the Hoy gang."

"Say!" Burr grunted, quite ungratefully. "Do I need to help herd him to Blanco? If I thought that—"

"Nah! We'll shackle him and cuff him and one of the boys here—that'll be you, Pancho Baca!—can ride in back with a shotgun. Huuuh!' What you joined together, Burr—that's Charley and me—it ain't likely to be tore asunder none."

"Then I'm glad I decided not to send you in cold pork instead of live pig, Charley," Burr told the prisoner generously. "So long, everybody—you, specially, Miggy; for blamed if I don't begin to wonder about you—"

When he drew in King before the Three-Bars kitchen door he had to force the mournful expression with which he faced Lou. It came to him, also, to hope that sour, pious Ad Barron had not happened to hear him chanting *Lulu Gal* as he rode up. Ad always put the worst face on everything and the fact that he had been singing only the whitewashed verses of that wicked song would hardly be believed by Deacon Barron.

"Sheriff sent me over," he told Lou, who was watching him with dark eyes narrowed, face as blank as his own. "It was like this—"

Briefly he told her of the trouble in San Andres and she listened with no change of manner. Ad Barron came to stand beside her and, if his lined face showed no particular pleasure, Burr thought that it was no more vinegary than usual.

"Must've took your time coming from the S," he said sourly. "'Course, Tres Jacales—Terras's place—was on the road. Thought you aimed to hang and rattle on that scoun'el Charley Ponnell's trail, way us old Indian-fighting Rangers used to do—huh?"

"I—I did stop at Tres Jacales," Burr confessed meekly. "At Terras's place, too, Mister Barron. It—well, about Charley Ponnell it was. He wanted some money to take out of the country with him and—he tried holding up the place and I collected him and he's on the way to town, now, sheriff riding herd. So I reckon my detail's cleaned up. Nothing more to do in Blanco. I—well, I reckon I'll be pulling out right

away. It'd be mighty nice to take in the dance tonight, for last thing—"

"*I* wouldn't want to miss it, either," Lou said hesitantly, examining the tip of King's left ear. "If you haven't asked anyone to go, Burr—"

Miggy—Burr was addressing the *vaquero* mentally—*you have busted your lifelong record. Yes, sir! This is one time you somehow told the truth.*

Later, riding into Blanco by the Long Road in Ad Barron's new buckboard, dancing with Lou until one of the morning, riding out of town with her in the friendly darkness, Burr found his thoughts entirely pleasant—however jumbled.

Lou sighed and leaned against him. Burr's arm went around the slim shoulders and drew her closer still. He bent to her face.

"Why—Burr!" she cried. "You—I—I thought you never were going to kiss me! You acted like—as bashful as you used to be. Remember how we used to ride together, and—?"

"Haven't forgotten a thing. But it did look a lot like you'd forgotten everything. When you didn't give me a chance to ask you to go to the dance—and I rode King to a lather getting to the Bars the minute I could leave the Tees—"

"I waited and waited. Then I wondered if you were even thinking about asking me—if you thought about me the way I've always thought about you—But it doesn't matter now! Nothing matters, now, Burr! You didn't mean what you said, about leaving? Just because you've caught Charley Ponnell? You won't, now? You can't!"

"Oh, I've got to report back in Verde. But I'll ask Captain Ladd to discharge me. You know blame' well leg-irons couldn't hold me away from you, now! Trouble is, *querida*, I have got nothing in the world to show your father. If only I had four-five thousand—if only I had! You heard about Colorado Bittner?"

He told her of his hopes in that direction.

"Likely the old man'll just tell me nothing doing," he admitted. "But I'm certainly going to put it up to him before I leave, and put it up to him strong. One thing in my favor is I always have been good with horses and the Rocking Chair being a horse-ranch has got to have that kind of man. If only the Hoys and Charley Ponnell had been train-robbers or bank-robbers with rewards on 'em, instead of rustlers— Luck's a funny thing—"

He laughed grimly—then thought of his day to the present moment came to soften him. "But I've certainly had my share, *querida*, since I landed here this time. I wouldn't trade with any man in the world! I was just thinking how things have run the last three-four years for Sergeant Howe and me. I've got the best record for settling cases I've had—like this one, here. But no matter how hard-case my men are, there never is a nickel reward on 'em! Howe—why, every time he brings in a hairpin for raising Cain in a saloon, the fellow turns out to be wanted five hundred dollars' worth, somewhere. He's made eighteen hundred, just this last year."

But, having kissed her at the Three-Bars door and put the team away and got from Ad Barron almost a friendly—because not unfriendly—word, Burr rode King toward Sad Woman Pass in contented humor. Going through the first light of dawn with cottontails and jackrabbits jumping up ahead of King and the little wind ruffling greasewood

and mesquite, Burr told himself that if Colorado Bittner balked, something else would turn up—for he would turn it up!

When he awakened near noon, on the Circle-S, Maria told him that the Sills had not come back from town. Nor had Mig' returned from Tres Jacales. She gave Burr steak and eggs and coffee in the kitchen. He went out to the front gallery and settled in a great hickory chair to smoke and doze and wait for Frio's coming with the mail. He was jerked out of sleep by shrill yells from the kitchen and got up to run that way, drawing his Colt.

Maria cowered between stove and wall. She said that Mig' had come back very drunk, threatening to cut her heart out. He had run out again, brandishing his knife.

"I will find him," Burr promised. "But, now, since he has not cut you, I think that he will fall asleep and forget it. You should not give him so much reason for jealousy, Maria. You smile too much at the men. But I will find him and take the dagger."

He went out to the corrals and called Mig' without getting a reply. It was the same in the two-room *'dobe* house of Mig' and Maria, and in the other buildings. He found only the *grulla* horse which Mig' had ridden, unsaddled, beside King in the corral. He was at the side of the house when Maria yelled again, then rushed around the corner and flung herself at him, to catch him around the neck with both arms and cling and cry out that she feared for her life.

"Stop it, *tontita!*" Burr commanded wearily. "He's not going to hurt you. I won't let him touch you. I swear, I'll do some of the cutting around here, myself. But I'll use a sticky quirt. Come on, now, Maria! Let's go back and get him out of the kitchen and—"

"No, no, no! I will stay with you—I will not go back while he has still that dagger."

"Come!" he said irritably, trying to loosen her arms, watching the corner of the house where Mig' might be expected to appear. "I tell you—"

Then he heard the sharp sound behind him, like hands clapped together. He whirled that way and once more Ad Barron cracked the whip over his buckboard team. They spun on the soft ranch road and went at the gallop toward the gate. But not before Burr saw Lou sitting rigidly beside her father—saw her furious face. The buckboard took the turn into Blanco Road almost on two wheels and the team raced on toward town.

Maria had seen, too. She looked up at Burr and shook her head. But he pulled away from her, not listening to the soft Spanish words of regret. He took a long step toward the corral, bent on saddling King and riding hell-for-leather after the buckboard. Then he stopped. Very well he knew father and daughter. This was not the time to try explaining to Lou the flashing-tempered, Ad the sour and suspicious, that he had not been making open and scandalous love to that pretty little fool.

He gave over, also, the thought of explaining to Mig'—quirt in hand—his opinion of the Aranda family troubles. Instead, he went back to the gallery and sat there moodily until Frio Sills and his wife drove in with a buyer for the Circle-S bulls. Frio handed him a letter from Captain Ladd, but did not trail

Mrs. Sill and the fat, red buyer. Instead, he stood hesitantly beside Burr like a man embarrassed—and uncertainty of any sort was so strange in him that Burr frowned.

"Uh—Burr," Frio said at last, "I met Lou and old Ad in town. I—well—they sent a message to you."

"Huh? Message? Lou sent me a message? Well! What was it? *Amor de dios!* Don't stand there boggling, Frio—"

"It was from the both of 'em. In fact, more from Ad than from Lou. It was— Burr, what've you been tangling with that o'n'ry old hoot-owl about, anyhow? And Lou? Why, last night at the fandango seemed to me you two looked like you was all primed to ram a spoke into Alf Quern's marrying wheel and step out double and—"

"What did they say?" Burr demanded furiously.

"Not to set your foot on the Bars again! That was Ad. Lou—" Frio's rugged face was honestly concerned as he looked down at Burr and shook his head "—you know how she looks when she's just so *blame'* mad she can't find words scorchy enough—she says: 'Never in his life again! Never! And that will be too soon for me, you tell him I said, Frio!' Now, Burr—"

"It was Maria and Mig'," Burr told him, then explained shortly. "Mig's gone again. At least, I think I heard him busting down the timber a spell back. So—"

"It's certainly tough luck," Frio told him sympathetically. "But after Lou kind of cools off— Tell you! Le' me talk to her, tomorrow or next day. Maybe I can make her see straight—"

"I'll talk to her myself, tonight. To old Ad, too! They stay in town? Didn't? Well, then! Cap'n Ladd says for me to come on in. So I'll be hightailing tomorrow. But nobody is going to run Burr Daley like a yellow dog without giving him a chance to say his li'l' piece! After I've said it, they—she can do as she's a mind to. Ah—*nombre del diablo!* Luck!"

He rammed his hands into trouser pockets, feeling for that silly Yaqui charm. It was in neither pocket, nor in his shirt pockets. He looked at the ground, walked to the corner of the house, along it to where he had stood with Maria, then to the corrals and back to the kitchen. When he had retraced every step taken since coming back from the Three-Bars, he stood scowling. Then—

"Ah! I'm crazy as a hoot owl, myself!" he grunted. "What could that fool thing do, one way or the other? Sheriff'd sent Alf off to San Andres before I ever saw it. Charley Ponnell made his plan to stick up the monte game because it looked like an easy touch. Lou told me she'd been waiting for me— All the luck in that thing was Mig's: it made *him* ten dollars."

He was grimly quiet through supper. Afterwards he went out to saddle King. He lifted a hand to the group on the gallery and rode toward Tres Jacales. King's hoofs fell softly on the sandy road and he came to the corner of Terras's unnoticed. Voices in the darkness pulled his head toward the side wall and in the pale light from a small, high window he saw Mig' and another Mexican.

"—who gave it to me before he died last month," Mig' was saying as he

held out his hand to the other man. "Once, many years ago, this talisman belonged to the Second Chief of the Eight Yaqui Villages—"

King jumped as at a runaway steer. Burr leaned and snatched the bit of metal from Mig's extended palm. The *vaquero*, with one look upward, howled as if the ghost of that Yaqui chief had breathed upon him. He lunged past the gaping villager and, still howling, vanished in the darkness. Burr caught his saddle horn and began to laugh gaspingly. He was still laughing when, a hundred yards along the road to Sad Woman Pass, he dropped the Yaqui charm into his shirt pocket.

Somehow the affair had pulled him out of gloominess. He rode up to the gate in Ad Barron's house lot quite cheerfully. Lou had a temper hung in the middle, of course; few knew that better than himself. But, also, she cooled down quickly. Old Ad was different, but—

Burr stopped King and looked at the front windows that made yellow rectangles in the long wall. A moving light at the corrals told of someone busy there. Ad? One of the cowboys? He hoped that it was Ad!

King walked up closer and Burr swung off, to drop the split reins and go noiselessly afoot up to the front gallery. He crossed the tiled floor of it and stooped, to look under the down-drawn shade that did not entirely mask a window.

Two men, strangers to him, stood by the great fireplace. The squat, dark one was talking out of an angry face. The lanky redhead seemed to be laughing at him. Burr got his ear close to the glass and the dark man's words carried to him:

"Plain nitwittedness! Just like you done at Laredo that time. I'm still packing a slug from that crazy play and I tell you I don't want no more! Come on, now! Leave her tied up and let's climb into the middle of them fast horses of Barron's and split the breeze for the Bravo! Come on!"

"We'll do that little thing," the redhead told him, grinning. "But Miss Purtiness'll be on one of Pappy's *sangrefinos* with us. Why, likely we'll see them Bravo *bosques* right ahead of us before old sher'f, he figures out we even come this way. Now you slide down to the c'ral and help Fingers shift our hulls and put the gal's on a good one. Why, fellow! Outside of her suiting me to a T, she'll maybe do fine for life insurance to all of us: *Segur' Miguel*, fellow! Suppose they was to come up behind us—think they'd do much shooting knowing she was a-bringing up the drag? Slide, fellow, slide!"

Burr waited no longer at the window. He went quickly to another at the far end of the gallery, one opening upon Ad's bedroom. He hooked nails under the sash and lifted it, slipped over the sill, and stood with Colt out, listening. Except for a stripe of light upon the floor, showing the door into the front room, this room was utterly dark. But to him came the sound of harsh breathing. He got matches from a pocket and squatted; with left hand he rasped the match-head upon the floor, turning his head away from the flare of it. Two yards from him he saw Lou's white face, dark eyes wide and glaring where she lay upon the floor tied like a bundle. Beyond her was another tied figure—a man, that one.

He came to his feet and jerked out

the little flame. To the girl's gasping whisper he answered with one word, his name. Then he crossed quickly to the door, turned its knob very slowly, then flung the door open to crash against the wall on his left. He stood framed in the doorway, facing the trio by the fireplace—for a big, tow-haired youngster had joined the redhead and the squat, dark man.

"Yup! Yup!" Burr snarled at them. "Grab your ears!"

The tow-haired boy began to raise his hands, gaping stupidly at Burr. But the others had been standing with hands close to gun butts. They pulled their Colts fast and Burr let his hammer drop as it covered the redhead, thumb-jerked it, and sent his second slug at the dark man. A bullet burned his neck as the redhead's pistol dropped and he bent to recover it. But the dark man had spun with the impact of that second slug. He took two long steps toward the center of the room, his back to Burr, then fell flat upon his face with arms outflung.

The tow-haired youngster had changed his mind. He drew his gun and, mouth half open and lifting to one side, fired at Burr, who was shooting at the redhead —and hitting him. Burr staggered with the shock of the bullet in his chest. Touch of the door frame steadied him and he walked in on the man. Another shot from the tow-haired one's gun, then he jumped for the door beyond the fireplace, yelled as Burr's bullet struck him, and went down to a knee.

Burr went grimly on, shifting his gun from right to left hand. The redhead, too, had a wound in the gun-arm. Hunkered on the hearth, leaning for support upon the chimney-breast, he had got his dropped gun in left hand and was lifting it as if it were almost too heavy to raise. Burr found the lean, reckless face blurring a little now.

"Drop it!" he commanded thickly. "Ah-h!"

For the redhead had got his Colt up and, breathing hard and noisily, was leveling it. Burr fired his last shell and the redhead went into a huddled sprawl that made him look like a dead frog, before he slid sideways to the hearth.

Burr raked the Colt away from the limp hand and looked at the tow-haired man. He lay on his side, now, across the threshold of that door he had so nearly got through. His gun was on the floor beside him and he gripped his leg above the knee with both hands while he groaned in agony.

Burr reholstered his empty pistol, stooped very carefully to keep from falling, got the man's Colt, and straightened with the same effort. He turned, then, to look at the redhead and the sprawling body of the squat, dark man. The body twitched—

As Burr stared through the haze that was thickening, the dark man lifted himself on propping hands, twisted his head, then sagged again. Burr went at lurching step toward him, tried to squat, dropped to the floor, sitting. The room seemed darker, though he could see the lighted lamp. His whole right side ached. He belted the Colt he had been holding, got the one the dark man had used, and tried to get up.

"All right, then!" he told himself irritably, when he only sagged instead of rising. "You'll crawl if you won't walk."

He hitched himself across the floor

toward Ad Barron's bedroom. With every heave of his body it was as though a hammer struck his chest. Someone began to call his name—but with furious additions. He looked towards Ad's door.

"If it wasn't—I know he wouldn't say words like that—I'd swear it was old Ad!" he said.

It was Ad, hitching himself into the lighted room. Burr let his pistol go and somehow found his knife, somehow cut the lariat that was wound about Ad's arms. After that—

It seemed to him that Ad was talking a lot. He clucked reprovingly, without opening his eyes.

"Cut out—that bad language!" he grunted. "Shame on you, Mister Barron. And—have *you* been feeding me—liquor?"

"Come out of it, cowboy!" Sheriff Wall called urgently. "Come on, now! Nothing wrong with you but a hole in your shoulder. I'd trade my rheumatism for it this minute—specially if I'd laid out Red Upton and Fingers Flint and Breed Jet Colson—"

"Huh?" Burr whispered, "Red Upton? That new Mexico *buscadero malo?* And—and Breed Jet, too?"

He blinked against the light. Faces were above him, and after a little time he could identify the sheriff, Ad Barron, several Blanco men, and—Alf Quern. All were grinning at him—except Alf. He moved a little on his pillow and a hand, certainly not a man's hand, was laid gently upon his forehead.

"Yeh, Red and Breed Jet and Fingers. They hit the Blanco bank 's evening and sneaked out. But I never got fooled by the fake trail they laid down and I was right close behind 'em with this posse. But they'd have got off, if you hadn't smoked 'em up. Looks like they'll all live to make shoes down at Huntsville, too, cowboy. You shot 'em up *just* bad enough. Made yourself six-seven thousand, too, what I remember about the rewards. Certainly had a lucky streak today."

Burr heard him without halting his effort to identify the hand on his forehead. He twisted his head and Lou leaned to look down at him—and smile.

"Luck," he said slowly. "Yeh, I certainly have had it—have got it!"

He felt clumsily in his shirt pocket, got out the little charm, and held it close to his eyes, turning it over, smiling. Then he stared frowningly at it.

"That lying scoundrel!" he breathed. "Mig' Aranda, I ought to quirt you clean across the country. This is not the one I had, that I scratched my initials on! Why—

"Well, it certainly worked out as well as if Old Second Chief himself had hung it onto me. *I* don't need a better charm!"

He reached up and got Lou's hand.

EVEN THE POPE KNOWS

TUCSON, Arizona Territory, a thriving metropolis of 7,000 persons, was mighty proud when, early in 1880, wires reached the town to link it telegraphically with the East. Mayor Bob Leatherwood proclaimed the occasion a day of celebration. Tucson's citizens feasted, drank, and cheered as messages arrived over the new wire service, congratulating the town upon its new eminence.

Mayor Leatherwood was standing drinks for the crowd at the Palace Hotel bar, where he ordered up another round every time a new message arrived. When President Hayes transmitted his greetings, Leatherwood proudly read the wire and ordered champagne for all hands.

As the day wore on toward evening, the number of messages dwindled and Mayor Leatherwood bought fewer drinks. Out through a side door slipped a couple of dry-throated and ingenious citizens. Within a few minutes there was delivered to the mayor a message conveying the flattering sentiments of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria. Bottles were set out on the bar again. Another message was handed the mayor. It expressed, in hearty but broken English, the congratulations of the Republic of France, delivered in French which no one could read. But the one which broke up the meeting was the following, signed *Antonelli :*

His Holiness the Pope wishes to convey to the Hon. Robert Leatherwood, mayor of Tucson, every assurance of his apostolic joy that communication has been established between the Eternal City and the pueblos of Tucson. And furthermore the Holy Father, praying that the Vatican may be enlightened by the revelation of this intelligence, desires to know of the Hon. Robert Leatherwood just where in hell Tucson is, anyway.

—CARL W. SMITH

Doc Sperry's Big Case

By GIFF CHESHIRE

MEDICAL PRACTICE *in the Chuckaluck country includes plenty of absorbing cases for Doc Sperry, but none quite so complicated and dramatic as that of Maddie Colbert's gluteal abrasions (skinned fanny, to us laymen). Maddie's soaring ambitions start a train of events which she has plenty of cause to regret—especially after she shucks her petticoat for emergency use as a signal flag. This story is published here for the first time.*

IN all his years of practice in the Chuckaluck country, Doc Sperry always declared that his most interesting case was one he had a considerable hand in causing. Doc could tell you about gunshot wounds, about legs, arms, and insides smashed by rolling broncos, about tough, pneomonia-ridden hombres dragging themselves through blizzards for his help. He would drop his black grip, ready to fight, if you impugned the hardihood of the pioneer men around

Canyon Junction. But his old eyes came most alive when he talked about a case which involved a woman, a river packet, a load of wool clip, and a disaster-defying run down the Devil's Washboard.

It was an injury that was on its way the day Captain Fred Gale, skipper of the steamboat *U. S. Grant*, contracted a cold by standing a wheel watch one wet day when a man his age should have known better, having just recovered from a belated case of measles. Doc Sperry had been interested in the captain for years, due to a combination of circumstances.

In the first place, the *Grant* had made many an unscheduled run with only a whang-leather old backwoods doctor for a passenger, when some emergency called him to one of the many river landings. In the second place, the captain and the doctor were upper crust in the town's society, which was dominated by the captain's daughter Maddie. Finally, Doc just plain liked Fred Gale.

So Doc felt pretty bad when he failed to save Fred from the pneumonia that followed his foolhardy but typical recklessness with his health. He was also worried about the orphaned Maddie, who had been a fragile, motherless little thing. Yet he learned very shortly that he could have spared himself the concern. Maddie turned out to be abundantly self-reliant, though working in a strange way.

Everybody on the Chuckaluck liked big Tom Colbert, who had been first officer on the *Grant*, and Tom in turn liked everybody. He seemed to have a real love, though, for nothing beyond the wheezing old sternwheeler and the river it plied. Nobody was surprised when Maddie immediately elevated Tom to mastership and gave him full charge of the *Grant*. That was good business sense. The surprise came when Maddie up and married Tom the day she was out of mourning.

Being of a scientific bent of mind, Doc could not help trying to ascribe causes to the variegated phenomena he habitually observed. Tom Colbert was a superb specimen of a man, and it seemed to Doc that Tom could have put Maddie in his vest pocket. There had apparently been no attraction between the pair previously, Maddie having her pick of the young men from Scottsburg to Stubtoe Wells, Tom having the *Grant*.

Doc got his first insight into Maddie's quick little mind the day Tom started to build the *Madeline*, laying her keel above the town and bringing up boilers and iron fittings from Benton. This show of enterprise puzzled Doc considerably, for the old *Grant* was entirely adequate to the needs of the Chuckaluck, of which Canyon Junction was the head of navigation. There were several settlements on above, but the river grew wild up there and nobody had ever tried to steamboat it.

Canyon Junction had become the base and distributing-center for all the wide country beyond, the *Grant* linking it with the big towns below, and Zebra Nance's freighters fanning out above.

Doc Sperry did not like Zebra Nance, and was suspicious of anybody who did. His freight outfit consisted of a score of hardcase skinners and swampers. Zebra, who was as big a man as Tom Colbert, had a shaggy head of hair, and his nickname came from a streak of pure white that ran along the center of it.

The principal wagon route out of Canyon Junction was to Stubtoe Wells. They grew a lot of wool around the Wells, and they had a nice-sized town there. Zebra Nance kept a string of high-wheelers on the trail most of the time, supplying the merchants of Wells and hauling out the annual wool clip.

The new *Madeline*, a stout little craft, small even for the Chuckaluck, was nearly built before Doc got an inkling from Tom Colbert as to his intentions. One idle afternoon Doc strolled up to the willow flat where two boat carpenters were putting the finishing licks on her. Tom was there, for the *Grant* had not gone down the river that day.

Doc could see at a glance that Tom was excited, and he privately confessed to an overwhelming curiosity. "Think you'll ever get her up the river, Tom?" he asked in a very innocent manner.

Tom's saddle-leather face screwed up in a grin of satisfaction, as if he could scarcely hold himself. "Doc, give me a good morning dew, and I could run her right up main street to your office."

"But the upper Chuckaluck," said Doc, still maintaining his look of innocence, "it's mighty fast water."

"Doc, I built her specially for that." Tom caught himself at last, looking at Doc in a pained way. "Who told you what we aim to do with her? Maddie?"

Doc grinned. "Just guessing, Tom." He was pleased at his sharpness in deciding that Maddie meant to put a packet on the upper river, a stretch everybody had dismissed as impossible to navigate. He was also a little worried. This would be an outright invasion of Zebra Nance's territory. Doc had seen a number of other wagon freighters try to crash it to their sorrow.

Doc had heard once that Maddie had been after Fred Gale to try it, and now he began to see the practical craft and daring behind those pretty, helpless-looking eyes. Maddie had always had rather expensive tastes, which her father's earnings with the *Grant* had gratified none too well. So Doc Sperry began to understand and he likewise began to grow angry.

Fred Gale had been a mild man, too old for ambition. Tom Colbert was powerful physically and bedazzled enough by his incredible luck in winning the prettiest girl in the country to be neither suspicious nor resisting. Standing there in the thick carpet of chips and shavings, Doc felt his old blood heating. He had no desire to have this Tom Colbert brought in to him in a basket to satisfy the extravagant fancies of a scheming woman.

Doc worried about it as he went back to his office over the express office, and his fears were realized when Zebra Nance took action the day the new *Madeline* was skidded off her stocks into the upper Chuckaluck. Doc heard about it from Tom, who came up afterward to have a cut eyebrow sutured, and the old medico experienced a little regret at having missed it.

The new packet had scarcely splashed her bottom onto the water when Zebra came stomping across the flat with a handful of his skinners. Tom and the carpenters and the new crew he had hired were on hand to meet them. For half an hour, Tom reported, it looked like his new packet was going to be reduced to kindling wood before her

wheel had ever turned. But at last Zebra had been forced to retire.

"So the frog's jumped, Doc," said Tom, wincing a little as Doc worked with his needle. "I guess he'll raise a hell of a row when I take her up to Flatter's Landing to bring down the wool clip."

"You may be on the right track there, Tom," said Doc, amazed at the man's blindness. "How do you know you're going to haul out the wool clip? Zebra's always hauled it before."

Tom grinned, and there wasn't much relish in it. "Well, Maddie's figured out a slick trick. She says she knows how it hurts me to see mules and wagons going where a steamboat ought to go. She's a mighty thoughtful woman, Doc. She says she figures I can be a big transportation figure in these parts, and since that's what I want she wants it, too. She says I'll be a hero if I run Zebra outta business, so she's willing to be brave about me taking all that risk."

"I can see that she's plumb sacrificed herself for your career, Tom," said Doc, applying a bandage and frowning. "But what's her trick?"

"Well, it's only a couple of miles from Flatter's Landing to Stubtoe Wells. It's like this, Doc. The storekeepers up there don't like Zebra's gouging freight rates, but they ain't kicked much because they can pass the cost on to their customers. But the sheepers don't like getting nicked when he hauls out the clip. It comes right out of their pockets. And they got to pay the extra freight charges the stores pass onto 'em, getting belted by Nance coming and going."

Doc finished his repair work. "So?"

"So Maddie done a little inquiring around among the sheepers. They're done shearing now, and they're going to let us bring out the clip. If we can make a go of it, Maddie figures it'll persuade the store people up there to switch over. I can bring the whole country into my steamboat business. Pretty smart, eh, Doc?"

"Tom," said Doc, "there's such a thing as being too smart. You watch Zebra Nance. That haul's his biggest piece of change. He don't mean to lose it even if he has to smoke you up with a six-gun."

Some of the worry Doc knew was in Tom showed through. "Yeah, I guess —but a big man don't stop for things like that."

"Nor a little woman," Doc said, ushering Tom to the door.

Doc knew it was none of his business, but he was furious at Maddie Colbert. He was still fuming about it that afternoon, when old Pike came in.

Old Pike was a hostler over in Zebra Nance's freight yard, and nobody knew much about him. He had a way of running to Doc every now and then with some worry about his tough old body. He never took any of the medicine which Doc gave him to satisfy his mind; it was the consultation old Pike enjoyed.

As to medicine, he had his own brand and plenty of faith in it. In fact, it was because of this that he harbored a burning hatred for Zebra Nance. Zebra would not stand for drinking around his barns, fearing that Pike might accidentally start a fire while he was under the influence. Yet Zebra, when he found one of the jugs old Pike kept hidden around, simply smashed it, leaving no chance for salvage. Doc knew old Pike could have watched Zebra boil in oil without stirring a muscle.

Old Pike was complaining about a pain in his left knee, but Doc knew he was just hankering for a little gossipy talk. He had a halting, indirect way of broaching a subject.

"Doc," he said, while the medico rubbed his knobby old knee with eucalyptus oil, "let me know when Tom starts to have a young 'un for Maddie."

Doc grinned; the old coot had put it sharply. By now the whole town was whispering about Maddie's wearing the family pants, with Tom never suspecting the true state of affairs. But Doc did not answer, not liking to indulge in gossip except to himself.

"Doc," old Pike went on, "Zebra'll kill 'im. He'll blow that new steamboat of Tom's so's Maddie can't even sell it for toothpicks to finance her new widow's life."

"It's none of our business, Pike," Doc said sharply.

"It'll probably get you some business." Old Pike glowered. "Dad-gum it, Doc, I like that knotheaded galoot. I gotta eye for a pretty woman, too, but be-dammed if I like to see one roon a man just to buy herself some doodads!"

The whole town was on edge the morning Tom stood the new *Madeline* up the river for Flatter's Landing. She was a proud little craft, and she stepped up the foaming river and soon disappeared around a bend. Doc was on hand to see her off, with a hundred others, and he had a tightness in his throat as he went back to his office.

It was mid-afternoon when old Pike came panting in, dizzy from galloping up the stairs. Doc was free at the time, trying to read but really worrying, when the old hostler burst through the door into his private office.

"Doc, for cripe's sake!"

"Take it easy," advised Doc. "What's the trouble?"

Old Pike's eyes gleamed wickedly. "I allus knew that rapscallion'd leave me a chance at him in the end. Jug after jug of mine he's busted! Well, I was taking a little pull over in the barn, Doc, and I heard Zebra and Din Tutwaller coming. You know Din—he's Zebra's own skunk stripe. Well, I jumped into the granary to save my jug, so I couldn't help hearing what they said."

"Yes," Doc said patiently, "but what did they say?"

"They're rigging a trap to catch Tom Colbert. A bad 'un, Doc. We gotta do something."

Doc was getting alarmed himself. "Tell me about it, Pike."

"They got that little cable off the stump-puller the boys use to snake a heavy rig outta a mud-hole. They're gonna string it across the river at Cedar Narrows. It'll lop off Tom's stack and pile him up and set him afire, sure, Doc!"

Doc didn't have to be told—he had fished at the Narrows and knew it well. The whole upper river was deeply cut. The Narrows started a slot of particularly hellish water, with the Devil's Washboard just below. For once, old Pike was probably not stretching things.

"But that'd be sheer murder, Pike!" exclaimed Doc.

The oldster snorted. "Who'd there be to say who done it if nobody lived

through it? They could have their cable down and be gone long before anybody found out what happened to the *Madeline*."

Doc was thinking fast. He sent old Pike to the livery to get his own two fast grays and the buggy. He had Pike pick him up at Maddie's house, for he wanted her to know definitely what sort of brew she had stirred up.

Her awakening was abrupt and thorough. "Not really, Doc! Oh—and it's all my fault! I'm just a selfish, scheming woman!"

"That," said Doc coldly, "would have been a lovely discovery for you to have made yesterday."

Within fifteen minutes the buggy and its three passengers were clattering eastward from Canyon Junction. The river banks were high all the way up, and the wagon road stuck to the top, sometimes climbing, sometimes dropping, sometimes running flat for a mile or so. Doc's trotters were in good fettle and served him excellently, as they had done so many times before.

None of them had thought to bring a weapon, yet Doc doubted that they would have had the daring, to say nothing of the force, to stop at Cedar Narrows and argue the ethics of the case with Zebra Nance and whatever hardcase skinners he had with him. Doc could think only of Tom Colbert and the *Madeline*, which would be well on the run home by now.

He heaved a sigh of relief when they passed the Narrows, four miles above the town, without having seen the stout little steamboat. Maddie sat quietly between him and old Pike, who was putting on the best demonstration of a man swearing without making a sound that Doc had ever seen. Maddie was plainly scared within an inch of her life —now that it was probably too late.

Doc worried about getting down to where they could flag the steamboat when they finally spotted her, for the river in this reach was hugged by sheer basalt cliffs. They had just passed Rubble Slide when, at last, they saw the little packet chuffing unconcernedly downstream with her load of wool gorging her superstructure and piled on her decks. Doc wheeled off the road and tied the team to a scrub juniper.

"We'll never make him see us!" Maddie moaned. "It's my fault! I've killed him!"

"And *them*," said old Pike sourly. "He's got a crew aboard, you know."

"Shuck off your petticoat!" Doc told her sternly. "I'll try to flag him!"

He and Pike strode to the lip, which was almost a hundred feet straight above the water. Dropping behind, Maddie worked fast, and in a minute ran forward to hand her long petticoat to Doc, who waved it wildly. The steamboat came on without notice.

"The sun's behind us!" moaned old Pike. "He won't ever see us!"

Maddie let out another moan, and before Doc knew what she was up to she was racing westward along the cliff. He followed her, with old Pike behind him, but her youth soon put her far ahead. By the time Doc saw what she was up to, she was too far ahead to hear his gasping voice.

Rubble Slide was part of a moraine left there in bygone ages, when a vast ice movement had ripped and scraped the region into its rugged shapes. It presented a sharply slanted face of rotten, crumbled rock, between cliff faces

that broke abruptly on either hand. Maddie had to run to her left for a hundred yards to reach the top of it.

She went to the top, and she started down. Doc yelled weakly with heaving lungs, but it did no good. Then her feet flipped from under her and she sat down heavily and began to slide. Later Old Pike swore that smoke lifted behind her, but Doc maintained it was only dust.

Doc was thinking of two things: that he had robbed Maddie of a petticoat, and that the slide terminated in fierce water.

Maddie hit it after what seemed minutes and started paddling. Doc realized then that there might be method in her madness. Down there she was out of the sun. She could make Tom see her—maybe hear her wild screams. Doc started to pick a gingerly way down the slope, old Pike cursing and following behind.

By the time Doc was three-fourths down, the steamboat was nearly abreast of Maddie, and he feared that Tom was neither going to see nor hear his wife. Both oldsters waved their hands and yelled like madmen, and finally there came an abrupt response from the *Madeline's* whistle. Tom let her swing below Maddie and back. Doc saw a deckhand cast Maddie a life ring, then lift her aboard, wet clothing plastered to a mighty pretty figure, Doc was not too busy to note.

Tom nosed the packet in against the slide while Doc climbed aboard. Old Pike stayed on the slide, apparently not trusting water under his feet any more than he did in his gullet. Tom was still at the wheel, but the pilot house was not very high on this boat, and Doc could see the surprise and concern in his eyes.

"Tom!" cried Maddie, lifting an anguished face to him. "Zebra Nance's got a cable stretched across the Narrows! He's probably got men there with guns! Take the wool back up to Flatter's, Tom!"

Tom listened, seeming not particularly surprised at anything but Maddie's appearance. At last he said, "Take her back to town, Doc. I'm going on down!"

"Oh, please, Tom! You'll be killed!" Maddie pleaded.

Remembering Tom's pride, that day in his office, in the ambitions with which Maddie had enlivened him, Doc saw that she was now taking exactly the wrong tack. Tom's jaw thrust out; his chest swelled. "It's stuff like that that proves Zebra Nance has got to be cleaned out of this country! You get ashore, Maddie. I'm going down."

The crew was gathered on the foredeck now, listening intently, and Doc saw that Tom's decision was all right with them.

Maddie stamped a foot. "Then I'm going with you!"

There was no arguing her out of it. At last Doc turned to leap ashore. Old Pike grinned at him from the slide. "If'n you want the boat ride, Doc, I'll take back your buggy for you."

Doc glowered, for that made it awkward for him to refuse, but he turned back, and the *Madeline* shoved out into the stream again.

Doc, estimating that they were about three miles above the Narrows, found his tongue had grown to his palate. Tom stood at the wheel, his jaw clamped tight, and it seemed to Doc that the packet covered the distance in that

many minutes. Just before the bend above, Tom slacked off, leaning out the window.

"All hands inside! Deckhands and all!"

It was hot and smelly in the little freight house with all its sacked wool, yet Doc welcomed it. He climbed up onto the wool with Maddie and the two deckhands. Tom belled the engine room, swinging to port, then hard to starboard. The deckhands glanced at each other in a puzzled way while the *Madeline* swung about in the stream. Bells rang again and yet again, and then she was backing down.

At last a deckhand grinned brightly. "The hogstaff! It's high enough to catch the cable and protect the stack and deckhouse! Tom's gonna snap it for 'em!"

Doc tried to grin back, though he was actually little relieved. He had lived on the river long enough to know that the hogstaff was part of the ingenious framing that kept a steamboat's cumbersome yet relatively flimsy superstructure from sagging. On a sternwheeler such as this, it was usually stout enough to permit towing from it so as not to hinder steering. Tom's idea might work with the cable, but there was still Devil's Washboard to be taken backward—and the menace of Zebra Nance and his followers, undoubtedly armed and desperate.

The *Madeline* let out a defiant scream of her whistle as she chuffed backward into the Narrows, flashing paddles helping the rushing current. Doc shut his eyes for a long moment, then drew the slight feel of impact from the keel, through the wool and to his bony knees. There was a sound like a pistol shot, and he knew the cable had parted, singing free on either side of them.

In a voice like a prayer, Doc's deckhand companion said, "Now, if he can only keep her steered going through the Washboard!"

They surged out on deck then, and there were other sharp, cracking sounds. "Cripes!" the deckhand continued, "somebody's shooting at us!" They cut back into cover.

Doc could see better when he changed his position. Tom was having a time keeping the *Madeline* straight in the stream. He had belled again, and the engineer had reversed the paddles, now driving them full ahead in an effort to break their rush.

Doc spied the bend below the Washboard and its little spit of shoaled gravel and sand. He groaned. Nance's men were still shooting, a hundred yards upstream. He saw that the packet was not going to make it in the same instant that the stern ground into the shoal, swinging her sharply around. A great grinding sound came with the trembling of her hull. She lost way so fast that all the passengers were sent sailing to the deck. The *Madeline* was fast.

Doc scrambled to his feet, his nervousness suddenly gone, anger boiling in him. Zebra Nance and his men were charging along the bank, firing wildly. They were all out now, for they could not deny responsibility for the trap that had failed. They meant to settle it.

Doc charged up the ladder to the wheelhouse. "Don't you have a gun aboard?"

Tom glared at him. "What do you think we are, a warship?" A wheelhouse glass went out as he spoke. Then Tom Colbert exclaimed, "You know,

Doc, I'm kind of thinking Maddie steered me into this!"

"She's sorry," Doc said. "I'm more interested in getting OUT of this mess right now."

As though he had only stopped long enough to make up his mind to something, Tom belled again. "You're right, Doc. I'd hate to have any of my crew hurt on account of her. Now's a hell of a time to recollect how she's been talking about new furniture." He threw the wheel hard over as the paddles went into a hard, churning reverse.

It was no use. They were out of the Washboard's rush and in slack water. Moreover, they were on a shoal. Tom belled down the engine. He took a fireax off the bulkhead, swung around, and plunged through the door.

Doc followed, the fury in him spilling into reckless action. From the shooting, he estimated that Zebra Nance had two or three men with him—too many considering that the *Madeline* was totally without firearms. They had forted up, a short distance upstream, and were taking potshots at the craft.

"You stay back, Doc," Tom said. He strode to the bow and jumped ashore.

It was a cool demonstration of nerve Doc witnessed then. Tom would not ask his crew to endanger themselves any more than they were already endangered by the situation his wife had created for them. Bullets kicked up sand close to him. Tom found a downed sapling, hacked it free with the fireax and lopped off the top.

"Take the wheel, Jim!" he yelled at a deckhand. "George, you back her like hell when I pry," he told the gaping engineer. "I didn't trim this boat for shallow water for nothing."

Doc held a prayer on his tongue in the minutes that followed. Tom took a pry on a boulder and pitted his own great weight against that of the packet, having only the advantage of the fulcrum on his side and Zebra Nance's singing lead against him. As he pried, the engineer raced the engine backward at mad speed.

Water churned and streamed around the paddle. Again—and again—and at last she scrabbled back into the channel with a lunge. Tom splashed through the water, caught the bow, and swung up. He raced into the wheelhouse, and five minutes later Zebra Nance was far behind and Canyon Junction close ahead.

Reflecting with grim pleasure that Zebra Nance had at last hung himself with his own rope in this vicious attack, Doc climbed to the wheelhouse as the crew tied the *Madeline* up at the landing. Nance would scarcely be able to survive the outraged opinion of the town.

Maddie was in the wheelhouse. "I never dreamed it would lead to this, Tom! I never dreamed it!" she kept saying.

Tom's eyes were stern, and Doc knew that a change had occurred in the Colbert household. Tom said, "I've a mind to give you the spanking of your life!" He reached for her with a huge paw, as if to translate the impulse into action.

"Oh, no, Tom!" Maddie said, in a little scream.

It was then that Doc remembered the slide down the rubble at the start of this wild affair. Maddie saw that he remembered, too—and her face turned red.

"I reckon you better not, Tom," said Doc, finding himself able to grin again. "Massage is *not* indicated in a case of gluteal abrasions—ointment and bandaging's much more practical. Anyway, I reckon she's about squared up her foolishness. She loves you, and I reckon a man's got to let that make up for a lot of things beyond his powers of understanding."

He turned toward the gangplank. He had a score to settle with old Pike, after which he hoped the old codger could locate one of his jugs.

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR RANGE TERMS?

A Western Quiz by James A. Hines

SOME of the twenty common range terms listed below are correctly defined; others are not. Test your own knowledge of the language of the rangeland in the following manner: if you think a statement true, write a "T" after it; if you believe it is false, write an "F" after it. Then turn to page 136 to check your answers. If you get 15 correct, you're a yearling; 16 makes you a long yearling; 17, a two-year old; 18, a three-year old; and 19 or 20 correct makes you an old mossyhorn. Supposing your score is under 15? Then you're just a li'l dogie!

1. Branding consists of marking cattle with the owner's mark. T
2. A cayuse is a horse that has been spoiled in breaking. F
3. A waddy is a bronc-breaking expert. F
4. A maverick is a motherless heifer. F
5. To fork a horse means to discipline him. F
6. "Wet stock" is a term meaning stolen stock. T
7. When a bronc bucks in one spot he is sunfishing. F
8. Cattle off their home range are called strays. T
9. A bronco is a well-trained saddle horse. F
10. To snake means to drag by a rope. F
11. "Nester" is an opprobrious term meaning cattle thief. F
12. A cavvy is a band of saddle horses. F
13. A hazer is a hand who assists the buster in breaking horses. F
14. Kack is another term for saddle. T
15. A hot-roll is a fancy bit of bucking. T
16. A slick-ear is an animal which hasn't been ear-marked. F
17. Tapaderos are heavy gauntlets worn in winter. F
18. A cross-buck is a pack saddle. F
19. A dogie is an unbranded bull calf. F
20. Stragglers from the herd are called tailings. T

SHOWALTER, the new hand, is puzzled and irritated by the cold-shouldering given him by the rest of the roundup crew, but he goes about his business, doing his best not to show it. Then suddenly he finds himself branded as a holdup artist—with the choice of leaving the country or trying to clear himself. The latter alternative involves both fast talking and fancy shooting. This story has not been published before.

The Star-Faced Blacks

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

THE last calf of that day's gather was branded, and the calf wrestlers branders, and knifemen climbed the fence like a flock of kids let out of school, and mounting their horses whooped away at a dead run toward camp and a hot supper.

There was nothing to prevent George Showalter, the new man, from going with them, but being methodical and thoroughgoing, he tarried to help the two top calf ropers, Bob Saddler and Lefty Embler, stack up the branding irons, while Orson Landon, the roundup boss, kicked together the dying embers of the branding-fire.

Showalter overheard Lefty say, apropos of the departing punchers, "Well, looks like they'd come to life at last."

The remark had been personal rather than general, and Bob Saddler answered, "Sundown and supper is their happy time."

The ropers rejoined Landon a little ahead of Showalter. Lefty had taken out his sack of Durham and it was going the rounds. But when Landon finished rolling his cigarette he passed it back to Lefty, who returned it to his shirt pocket without offering it to the stranger. All three of them studiously avoided meeting his eyes. They climbed the fence silently and rode away without pausing to include him in the party.

Showalter glared after them resentfully for a moment, then muttering, "To hell with them," mounted his own horse. If they wanted to have their own little powwow it was all right with him. However, he had never been treated that way before, and he couldn't understand the reason.

He had worked on bigger and better outfits than this, and never on one that hadn't been glad to have him; here they acted as if he were the carrier of bubonic plague.

It was funny, too. When he had first joined the outfit everybody had seemed friendly, particularly Landon and his two cronies, Embler and Saddler. And then, all of a sudden, they had gone into a freeze. Nobody had accused him of anything so he had nothing to combat.

That evening, as usual, he filled his plate and sought a place well away from the squatting riders. A moment later Ival Goreman, owner of one of the smaller ranches represented in the cattle association, came over and joined him. Goreman was the one man who had remained moderately friendly.

"Look, Showalter," Ival said, "what's Landon got against you?"

"I don't know."

"He sure don't seem to like you."

"Well, that's his business," Showalter said tersely. "I got along without any favors from him a good many years. I guess I can muddle along a while yet."

Ival shrugged, as much as to say, *Well, I tried to be friendly, and it's not my fault if you won't be sociable.* He walked over and joined his own two men: Doc Lovelace, a big, talkative, red-faced oaf, and Slick Simms, a small, rat-faced fellow who was popular with nobody except Lovelace, and perhaps his boss.

Showalter was aware that the entire roundup crew had been watching while Goreman was talking to him, and again he wondered what it was that had turned the outfit so against him.

He had further proof of his isolation and Landon's lack of trust that evening when night riders were assigned. It was his turn, and he had caught a fresh horse, yet when Landon named the night guards Showalter's name was not called. He walked quietly over and turned his horse loose, but he didn't try to conceal his disgust. Thus far he had at least been allowed to do his work.

As long as he was on a job he would do his best, and that meant taking orders without question. But his resentment against Landon was high. Just as soon as the roundup was over he meant to call the foreman and find out what it was all about.

After breakfast the next morning he caught his own horse, a trim black gelding with a white star in its face. He had eight other mounts in his string, but this was Sport's turn. He had a feeling that there was some menacing reason back of all this cold-shouldering, and that something was due to break soon, so after breakfast, for the first time since

joining the roundup, he buckled on his gun.

Orse Landon waited until everybody was mounted before saying who should ride what circles that day. As usual Lefty Embler and Bob Saddler headed two detachments.

"Where's Ival?" Landon asked suddenly.

"He went home last night," Doc Lovelace answered. "Said he'd start from that end and work this way, and he wants you to send two or three men over that way to help him."

In as near a display of temper as he ever allowed himself, Landon said, "Who the hell is running this round-up?" He chewed the end of his mustache a moment, then said, "All right, you and Slick go help him. We'll bunch on Meadow Creek."

"We'll need another man," Doc persisted.

"All right," Landon said tersely. He allowed his gaze to slide over the riders, then said, 'Take Showalter with you."

Nobody noticed the gleam of satisfaction that passed over Doc's face, or the triumphant glance he exchanged with Slick.

For more than an hour Doc set a fast pace. Finally he pulled up on a high ridge overlooking the new and thriving town of Copperton. The sun was just striking the tops of the high ridges. The town was far below them, and as yet showed no signs of activity.

Doc dismounted, tightened his cinch, and rolled a smoke. "That's a good horse you're ridin'," he said to Showalter. "Almost a dead ringer for that one of Slick's. You two should flip a dollar to see which one takes 'em both."

Showalter looked at Slick's horse. He had noticed the similarity before' and apparently Slick's mount was about as good as Sport. "One horse is all I need," he said, "and I like Sport. Hadn't we better be moving?"

"No hurry," Doc drawled. "I know Ival. He's lazy as the devil when there's nobody to drive him. It's warmer here than it is down in the canyons. Just as well wait here as down there."

Showalter didn't take to the idea. When he was out he liked to get his work done. But Doc, at least tentatively, was the boss, and besides, this part of the range was new to Showalter.

"Most of the cattle on this side," Doc pointed out, "keep goin' till they hit the fences of the ranchers just this side of town. I can show you where you're to meet Ival down there. Me and Slick will go over to Spring Canyon and work what stuff we find out of there. We'll meet you back this way somewhere."

It was like a gigantic map lying open before them, and Showalter readily comprehended instructions. But after half an hour of Doc and Slick's conversation, he announced that he was going down and start to gather whether Ival was there or not.

But Ival evidently had got out early. Showalter met him several miles below the pass with a sizable bunch of cattle which he was belaboring along with his doubled-up lasso rope. His horse dripped sweat, and already the tongues were lolling from the slobbering mouths of the cattle. Showalter had thought that Goreman was a better cowman than that.

"Hadn't we better let 'em take it a little easy?" he asked. "If they get on the prod and bush up on us we never will get 'em to the pass."

"We got to shove 'em along while

it's cool," Ival said, and all but knocked a lagging calf off its feet with the end of his lasso rope.

Showalter looked at the man, wondering what was the matter with him. And again that feeling of unknown menace that gave him a half-sickened effect in his stomach came over him. But he didn't know why.

"Look," Ival said presently, "Landon should have sent at least two more men. If you think you can keep this bunch going. I'll ride over in Spring and give Doc and Slick a hand. They're liable to have trouble."

Showalter assented readily. The way Ival was acting he knew he could do better alone.

Already the cattle were beginning to brush up, and at times he had to drive them out on foot. It was hard work, but somehow he kept them going.

He lost all track of time, but it was long past noon when he got them strung out on the last steep pitch below the open basin under the pass. There Ival and Doc joined him.

"Been havin' some grief, looks like," Ival said. "So did we, but we finally got our stuff out. We'll take over now, and you had just as well sift on down to Copperton and get your dinner. It won't take long."

Ival, it appeared, had brought lunch along in his slicker for himself and his two men, and they had already eaten. It was no more than a twenty-minute ride to the town, and Showalter was hungry.

He tied his horse in front of a restaurant and went in. The counter was lined with men, so he dropped into a vacant booth behind them. Apparently he was going to get no quick service, for the waitress, a rather pretty girl, was talking excitedly to the men at the counter.

"Mr. Knowles looked terrible when he got in," the girl was saying. "He was all bloody where the holdup hit him over the head with a gun. He said he didn't know how long he was out."

"How much did he lose?" a man asked.

"Over seven thousand dollars—the whole pay roll."

Even yet Showalter was only moderately interested.

"Any clues?" a man asked.

"Mr. Knowles said it was a heavy-set man on a black horse with a white star on its face, and he was wearing a green-checked mackinaw and a black hat."

"Got a better clue than that," another man spoke up. "Orse Landon warned Knowles a week ago that a new man workin' for him had tried to interest a couple of other fellows in robbin' the payroll. Knowles and the sheriff have gone out there now to find out where this stranger was this forenoon."

It had happened. The feeling of menace had become a reality, and the sickening sensation in his stomach was the real thing. Outside was a black horse with a star on its face, and a green-checkered mackinaw tied behind the saddle. He couldn't prove where he had been that forenoon because he was alone, and because the men who could clear him were, he knew now, the men who had held up Knowles and taken the pay roll. If only one of them had done it, the other two had been in the conspiracy. They had planned to rig him for this crime ever since he had joined the outfit with a horse that looked like Slick Simms's black.

He found the sweat standing out on his face as the girl finally came around the end of the counter to take his order.

"Just make it pie and coffee," he said huskily.

Several men looked at him, but none of them had ever seen him before. The respite would be brief, because someone was sure to notice the black horse tied out there at the hitch-rail.

As he waited for the pie and coffee he reconstructed the crime. Ival Goreman was almost his own size and build; Doc Lovelace's saddle was the same make as his; Slick Simms's horse was the same color. As for the coat and hat—well, they had had two weeks in which to get duplicates for them, and when the job was over they could be hidden or destroyed.

Undoubtedly Ival Goreman, riding Doc's saddle on Slick's horse, had held up the paymaster. They had him sewed up like a chicken in a sack.

He wolfed his pie and gulped his coffee, paid his bill at the counter without waiting to get change, and went out. Several of the men followed him out, but there were no other horses near by, and the miners didn't seem to be carrying guns.

He swung into the saddle and started Sport off at a jog trot. Then, as the horse turned, and that green mackinaw came into view, a man yelled. "Hey, you on the black—come back here!"

Showalter didn't stop. He didn't exactly give way to panic, but he gave Sport the spurs—if he stopped he was a goner. The miners were milling excitedly, but a man who looked to be a cook rushed out with a rifle and fired a wild shot that went over Showalter's head. It would be only a matter of minutes before a posse was organized.

He headed back toward the range he had come from, and was out of sight before any pursuit developed. But there was danger that he might encounter the whole roundup crew, for as soon as the sheriff and the slugged paymaster joined them Landon would drop everything else to have the men join in the search for him.

His situation looked hopeless. He couldn't escape, and if caught he would be identified by the victim of the robbery as the bandit.

He had but one thing in his favor. This was timbered country, and he might elude the posse until dark, and then make his way out of the country. Only, getting out of the country was the furthest thing from his thoughts.

Suddenly he saw a posse through a break in the brush half a mile away. He spurred frantically into a quaking aspen thicket, which soon became so dense that he had to dismount, and even then he could get his horse only a little distance farther. But there was no sign that the posse had seen him.

Minutes later the posse trotted past just below, with Orse Landon and the sheriff at their head. A third of the roundup crew was with them, and in the group he recognized Ival, Doc, and Slick.

Showalter watched them ride out of sight, or nearly so. Then, when the posse was about to pass from sight, they stopped. For a moment Showalter thought someone must have sighted him; then he saw by the pantomime that Ival Goreman had lost his rope and was going back to look for it. It was an accident that could happen to anybody.

No sooner was Ival out of sight than

Showalter led his horse hurriedly out of the brush. The posse had already disappeared.

He didn't see his man at once. Then Ival came into view for a moment farther away than he had expected. The man was riding fast, and Showalter spurred in pursuit.

He wondered if it was possible Ival still had the paymaster's money on his person, but he didn't think it probable. Ival was too smart to take such chances.

Then his speculation ended as he saw Ival dismount and pick up his lost rope. He spurred behind a clump of brush to watch. Ival looked all around as he replaced the rope on his saddle, but when he started on he turned up a side canyon instead of trying to overtake the posse.

The man had dropped his rope as a pretext to leave the posse, but Showalter didn't know why. He was headed back in the general direction of Copperton, but he was in no hurry. He might be going back to move the hidden loot and double-cross his accomplices, but he wouldn't be likely to do it before dark, and it would be too difficult and dangerous for Showalter to try to follow him. But it did give him an idea.

There was a low saddle leading into the canyon Goreman was in, perhaps half a mile up. Showalter wheeled his horse and headed for that saddle at a dead run. He passed through it and got down into the brushy canyon not three minutes ahead of Ival. He could hear the man whistling with what seemed a great deal of satisfaction.

Showalter waited in the brush until Ival was almost abreast. Then he rode out, gun in hand. Ival, startled, made a tentative reach for his gun, quickly realized that it would only get him shot, and lifted both hands. Showalter reached out and took the man's gun.

"You're just the fellow I was looking for," Ival said hurriedly. "I never did believe you robbed that paymaster, and I can help you—"

"You're bloody well right you can help me," Showalter said grimly. "Where did you hide the money?"

"Me? What money?"

"You didn't think I'd take the rap, and still not get the money, did you?"

Ival said, "There's no use to deny that we did frame you. That horse of yours being a dead ringer to Slick's gave me the idea. All I had to do was whisper to Landon that you'd propositioned Slick and Doc to hold up the paymaster to throw suspicion on you before the job was pulled. But now that you know, just what're you going to do about it?"

"I could kill you."

"But you won't. You don't stand much chance to get away the way it is, and if you murdered me you'd be sure to hang. You couldn't get away even if I told you where the money is —which I don't intend to do."

Showalter realized that the man was right. Ival still held the whip hand, and for a moment his brain throbbed maddeningly. Goreman was nearer death at that moment than he realized. Showalter got hold of himself—neither talk nor violence would do any good where Goreman was concerned.

"You'd just as well be sensible, and accept the fact that you've been played for a sucker," Ival said confidently. "I don't want you caught, and as a matter of fact I hoped I would see you. I can hide you up for a week or so, and then help you get out of the country.

I'm not above giving you a couple of hundred dollars, either. What do you say?"

"I'm calling your hand, Goreman," Showalter said steadily. "We're hiding in the brush till dark, then I'm taking you to the cow camp to tell Landon and the others exactly what happened."

Ival laughed. "Try it, and see how far you get. Even if a few people should believe you, there are three witnesses against one."

Showalter made his prisoner precede him deeper into the brush, where they dismounted. He then made Goreman back up to a tree, and lashed the man securely with his own lasso rope.

"If I put a gag on you and rode away it might be a long time before they found —your body," he suggested.

"It still wouldn't help you," Ival said defiantly.

Showalter said no more. He stayed where he could keep an eye on the man, but nothing happened and no one came near. Darkness fell and Showalter was in no hurry to move. Goreman cursed viciously as the hours passed, and his captor made no effort to move. Still, he refused to talk, and gave no sign of capitulation. Whatever else he might be, Goreman was not lacking in nerve.

It was past midnight when Showalter finally untied the man and ordered him to mount.

"You're an awful damn fool if you take me to camp," Ival said.

Showalter replied quietly. "That's where I'm taking you."

They were riding along the bank of Meadow Creek when Ival saw his opportunity to escape. At the moment, Showalter had dropped a little behind, and his head was down as he fumbled with his rope strap. All Ival had to do was cross the creek, and the thick brush on the other side would afford him shelter. He couldn't guess that the taciturn man with him expected him to do that very thing—was, in fact, giving him every opportunity to escape.

Suddenly Ival wheeled his mount straight for the creek, and jabbed deep with both spurs. The horse responded with two long leaps that took it to the creek bank, and the third leap would have taken it to the middle of the creek. But just as the horse started its jump, Showalter's rope snaked out in an underhand toss, and the small noose flipped over its front feet. The animal turned completely over in the air, landing in the creek with a terriffic splash. Ival hit the water, too, which saved him from a possible broken neck.

The horse struggled to its feet, and it took a couple of minutes for Showalter to grab the reins and get his rope off its feet. By that time Ival, on foot, had disappeared into the brush.

Making no effort at all to find Goreman, Showalter proceeded on toward the cow camp, leading Ival's horse behind him. An hour before daybreak he located the cavvy and turned Ival's horse with them, letting the reins drag. He hid his own horse in the willows, then stealthily made his way to camp, crawling inch by inch like an Indian, finally managing to crawl in under the canvas of the empty bed-wagon. No fewer than thirty men were sleeping on the ground, two of them right under the wagon.

Showalter was a man of iron nerves, but they were like overdrawn wires now as he waited. His scheme was a long shot at best, and it depended upon timing. It would have much less chance of suc-

cess if the horse wrangler drove in the cavvy before Ival Goreman arrived.

It was just coming light, about the time Orse Landon always roused up and yelled at the cook and the wrangler, when Showalter saw a man approaching on foot, stepping gingerly as if he had blisters on his feet. It was Ival.

While Showalter watched, Ival went straight to Slick Simms's bed and tapped Slick on the shoulder. Showalter saw Slick's head bob up while Ival knelt and whispered something to him, then Slick, who always carried two guns, passed one to Ival.

An instant later Ival bawled out, "Everybody out! Man hunt!"

Heads popped out of blankets on every side like prairie dogs coming out of their holes.

"Who's that? What's up?" Landon yelled.

"It's me, Ival Goreman. I bumped into Showalter last night, and I've had a hell of a time. He took my horse and gun, and would have killed me if I hadn't got a chance to clip him on the chin, and take to the brush."

"Then the cuss is still in the country!" Landon said excitedly. "Everybody out! Which way did he go, Ival?"

Unnoticed, Showalter had slipped out of the back of the bed-wagon. "I didn't go far, Landon."

The quiet voice seemed to wash out every other sound. The whole round-up crew gazed at him with astonishment, their gaze riveted upon the two guns in his hands.

He had counted upon this break. He stood less than ten feet from Landon, and one gun pointed straight at the foreman's body.

"I'll give myself up presently, if you want me," he said, "but first I'm going to have my say, or you get a slug right in the guts, Landon."

"You can't get away with anything," Landon gulped. Sight of that gun made him a little sick.

"I'm not trying to get away with much," Showalter said. "Only to let these men know who actually did rob that paymaster. You see, Goreman did get away from me, but not the way he said. And he forgot to mention that he was carrying the seven thousand dollars he got off the paymaster in his saddle roll when I caught him."

Ival yelled. "That's a lie. He had the—"

"Shut up," Showalter cut in. "You can talk after I've had my say if you want to."

Ival started to say something, but a dozen men yelled, "Let him talk." They didn't know what it was about, but their curiosity was terrific. Few of them liked Ival Goreman, and while they couldn't understand his being on the defensive, they wanted to hear Showalter.

Showalter's nervous tension had passed. He was completely relaxed—and ready. "You see," he stated mildly, "Goreman not only framed me, but he double-crossed Slick and Doc by going back where they had hid the money, and he was taking it to another place when I nailed him."

"That's a lie!" Ival shouted.

Calmly Showalter made his supreme bluff. "If you men want to know who's telling the truth go look for Ival's horse. It got away from both of us when Ival made his break, but that money is still wrapped up in the slicker on his saddle."

Ival cut short his wrathy denial to scream. "Slick, don't! I can—"

Three shots cut the air with an almost simultaneous bang. Ival's shot came a trifle the soonest. He was standing, while Slick was still kneeling on his blankets four feet from him. His slug buried itself in Slick's brain, while Slick's gun exploded harmlessly.

The third shot came from Showalter's gun. It went across Ival's breast and drove through the muscles of his right arm. Ival's gun dropped, and the man turned and sprinted desperately for the wrangler's night horse. He had gone less than a rod when another bullet from Showalter's gun brought him down with a wounded leg.

Showalter paid no attention to Landon or the others, concentrating his attention upon Doc. He had correctly gauged the nature of Ival and Slick, and he thought he had Doc's number, too. Dull-witted and bovine, Doc couldn't think fast enough to get out of a hole, whereas Slick thought too fast.

"Don't move, Doc!" Showalter ordered tersely. "Keep your hand away from that gun! Now do you want to come clean, or would you prefer to stand trial with Goreman for murder?"

"Murder? I didn't kill nobody!" Doc blurted.

"But Goreman did, and you were in with him. Maybe you plotted with him to double-cross Slick, and then murder him."

Doc Lovelace was utterly bewildered and he saw nothing but hostility on every face around him. "No, no," he bellowed. "Ival double-crossed me the same as he did Slick when he moved that money."

"Wait a minute," Showalter said crisply. "Just *where* did you fellows hide that money?"

"Under the floor of that old abandoned cabin where Dutch John used to live —but I didn't even help rob the paymaster. Ival done that alone. All me and Slick done was help him frame Showalter, but he promised us a third each."

"We've heard enough," Orse Landon roared. "Somebody go out and find Ival's horse, and we'll take a look at that money."

For the first time Showalter grinned. "You'll have to go farther than that, Landon. Ival didn't have the money, but I reckon you'll find it all right where Doc says it is."

With a sob like an angry child's, Doc went for his gun, but Showalter's hand struck the gun in Doc's holster first, holding it down, while Bob Saddler and Lefty Embler each seized one of the fellow's arms.

Orse Landon said, "Showalter, I'll eat dirt for falling for that story Goreman told me about you. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Showalter said. "Anybody got a smoke?"

Half a dozen sacks of Durham were shoved in his direction at once.

Longhorn Cupid

By S. Omar Barker

JACK POTTER was a buckaroo who never looked at girls—
He claims—not even purty ones that wore their hair in curls.
His job was drivin' longhorns, and he set up in his kack
As sure and straight as if he wore a ramrod up his back.
He knowed the ways of cattle from their burr-tails to their ears—
'Twas even said he had the knack of understandin' steers
The same as if they spoke in words instead of with the eye,
But when it come to women he was spooky-like and shy.
One day some rancher girls rode out to watch his passing herd,
And Jack, he kinder tipped his hat, but never said a word.
It may be that he noticed one girl lookin' mighty sweet and fine,
But if his heart was smitten—well, he never showed no sign.
Then, up there in the lead, a steer that Potter called Randau,
He quit his lead position and he stepped out with a bow,
To gaze at Miss Cordelia with a most admirin' stare,
As if he hadn't never saw a girl so sweet and fair.
He looked at her a minute, then he turned to look at Jack,
And kinder twitched his sunburnt hair upon his long ol' back.
It gave Jack quite a start, I guess—him such a bashful man—
To have that ol' steer tell him, "Boy, git this one if you can!
For she's not only purty, but she's got the kind of stuff
It takes to stick right with you when the trail of life gits rough!"
Jack swears that ol' steer winked at him and rolled his big brown eyes,
Then added as an afterthought, "And Boss, this girl's a prize
There'll be some competition for! So now it's up to you.
I doubt if you can win her—but you're lucky if you do!"
Then Randau stepped back to the lead, and Jack, he scratched his head,
A-wonderin' if Miss Cordy knowed what-all that steer had said.
But if she did or didn't, when Jack looked at her he saw
The sweetest smile that ever brought a cowboy's heart to taw!

That all was way back yonder more than sixty years ago,
But last November, underneath a sky that promised snow,
Ol' Jack and his "Miss Cordy," at their home in Clayton town,
Invited all their folks and friends to come and gather roun'
To help them celebrate with joy the sixty years they'd spent
A-provin' Jack was right about what that ol' longhorn meant.
"Them ol' lead steers was smart," says Jack, a twinkle to his grin.
"Without Randau's expert advice, just think where I'd have been!"

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The Plains soldier who struggled with the redskins for the possession of the West was noted for his stamina and fortitude, but few even of that rugged breed could have equaled Captain Guy Henry of Troop D, Third U.S. Cavalry.

Too Tough to Kill

By EDWIN L. SABIN

"THIN as a shoe-string, with the heart of a lion," was the description applied to Captain Guy Vernor Henry of the old plainsdays U.S. Cavalry. When, after thirty-eight years of Army service he died in his bed, he had lost the use of one hand and one eye—but he had never lost his courage. His apparently frail physique was no measure of his spirit.

In the winter of 1874 he was stationed at Fort Robinson of the Red Cloud Sioux Agency, northwestern Nebraska. Orders required a march of 150 miles cross-country to the Bad Lands of the Dakota Black Hills. He set out, the day after Christmas, in command of his Troop D, Third Cavalry, with supplies for thirty days. The thermometer went to twenty, thirty, forty degrees below zero. The Indian guide appointed refused to brave the bitter cold. The little column got through, but upon the return march, desperate to reach quarters, was caught by a blizzard—a plains "norther"—when upon the last leg of the 300-mile tour.

Forty below, a furious wind driving sheets of hard-frozen snow that cut like gravel, a vast, unbroken treeless plain—and there they were, forty-five officers and men put to a blind reckoning.

Riders numbed in their saddles. Dismounted to get warming action by leading their horses, men fell exhausted. Captain Henry slapped and urged the men, forced them back into the saddles, strapped the helpless to their seats. He risked the last chance—"a race for life"—by ordering the gallop with the horses given their heads.

Away they went in a straggle, with no sense of direction, with Death riding rear and flanks. By a near-miracle they all finally brought up at a small ranch

cabin against a hill, occupied by a squaw-man and his Indian woman. It was sanctuary enough until relief came the next day from Fort Robinson—only fifteen miles, but long, long miles to the failing mounts and men.

Captain Henry's grip had frozen to the bridle reins, which had to be cut before he could leave his horse. His gloves had frozen to his hands. His fingers were frozen as far as the second joints; strips of flesh, baring the bone, came away with the slit glove fingers. His face turned black, so that at the fort his wife did not recognize him. A finger had to be amputated; his left hand—his bridle hand—stiffened and became practically useless, for he was never able to close the fingers of it. Everybody else in the command had also suffered injury, but none quite so much as he, owing partly to his thinness, partly to his fearless exposure in helping his men.

His defiance of injury was exhibited again in June, 1876, when the cavalry and infantry of Brigadier General George Crook, the Gray Fox, closed in upon the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne of the redoubtable war chief, Crazy Horse. At 8:30 in the morning of the 17th the hostiles, brought to bay, drove the Crow and Shoshoni scouts pellmell back into the rest camp in the bottom of a circular valley watered by Rosebud Creek and circled by low, ridgy clay bluffs. The bluffs bristled with war-bonnets—a thousand and more, rallying at long range.

This was the battle of the Rosebud, in which the Sioux and their allies stopped the advance of General Crook, who had cut loose from his baggage train. The fighting was very hot, with charge and counter-charge, by horse and foot, among the ridges and even on the lower levels.

Shortly before noon Captain Henry, at the base of the western bluffs, was struck by a rifle ball while cheering his troop to the rescue of a hemmed-in battalion. The heavy slug entered under his right eye, tore through both cheek bones by way of the roof of his mouth, and made exit under his left eye. Almost blinded, spitting blood, he tried to spur his mount to the front again, but lurched from the saddle. A melée surged over him before he could be carried to safety. He managed to get upon his feet and lean against a tree.

A wounded private saw him, his face a bloody pulp, and said, "That poor fellow's done for." And Henry mumbled. "Not by a damned sight!"

Surgeon McGillicuddy came to tend to him, and was greeted with the order: "Fix me up so I can go back." Taken to the rear, he lay upon the hard ground throughout the afternoon with a blood-soaked, fly-covered bandage over his face, while an orderly shaded him with a horse.

John F. Finerty, *Chicago Times* correspondent in the field, bent over him in sympathy. He heard the captain say thickly. "It's all right, Jack—for this we are soldiers. I hear you've done well. I advise you to join the army for a commission."

There was no shelter for the wounded. The night was cruelly cold. The wagon and supply train was parked fifty miles to the south, and the country was rough and broken. The captain made the trip in a litter made of a blanket slung between poles with the ends riding a mule, fore and aft.

The poles were short and the mules objected to the smell of blood. The rear mule bit the captain's head. The

captain was reversed, head to the fore. The lead mule threatened to kick him. When the animal stumbled, the captain pitched out upon his head, but gave only a stifled grunt. His rations consisted of occasional broth made from birds killed by his soldier-and-Indian escort.

From the baggage camp it was 150 miles by jolting, grass-padded wagon, to Fort Fetterman of eastern Wyoming. The captain was determined to report to his wife. He had left her at Fort D. A. Russell, near Cheyenne. Since she could not come to him, he would go to her. It was 100 miles by ambulance to Medicine Bow station of the Union Pacific Railroad. It was 100 miles by train to Cheyenne.

Opposite Fetterman he had to be ferried across the swollen river in a small, leaky skiff. During the night wait at Medicine Bow bullets through his tent from Fourth of July celebrators narrowly missed his head.

In the train passage over Sherman Summit of the Continental Divide his heart, weakened by sedatives, nearly failed. At Cheyenne he refused the waiting ambulance, took a carriage, and once inside the post walked, under guidance, to his quarters.

There, after two weeks' travel, he greeted his wife with a smile under his mask of bandages and with the words: "This is a fine way to celebrate the Fourth, isn't it!"

A year's leave healed him, in a way. With a scarred face, a sightless eye, a crippled hand he returned to duty again in another campaign under Crook. He lasted only an hour in the saddle, rested under a tree, ignored recall orders, caught up with his command, and lasted six weeks in the field.

He remained active to the end. In his further career he outlasted heat and cold and Indian campaigns. Service in the tropics during the Spanish War killed him. He died in 1899, at the age of sixty, while he was still on the active list—a brigadier general, assigned to the Department of Missouri.

It had been a survival, perhaps of the fittest—certainly of the fightin'est.

Answers to "Range Terms" Quiz on Page 121

1. True. 2. False; originally a cayuse was an Indian pony—the term is now used to designate any horse, or sometimes an inferior one. 3. False; a waddy is a cowpuncher. 4. False; a maverick is an unbranded animal. 5. False; to fork a horse is simply to straddle him. 6. True. 7. False; sunfishing consists of twisting the body from right to left during jumping. 8. True. 9. False; a bronco is a wild or semi-wild horse. 10. True. 11. False; a nester is a homesteader who settles on government land. 12. True. 13. True. 14. True. 15. False; a hot-roll is a cowboy's bed-roll. 16. True. 17. False; tapaderos are leather coverings for the stirrups. 18. True. 19. False; a dogie is any motherless calf, especially one which has not wintered well. 20. True.

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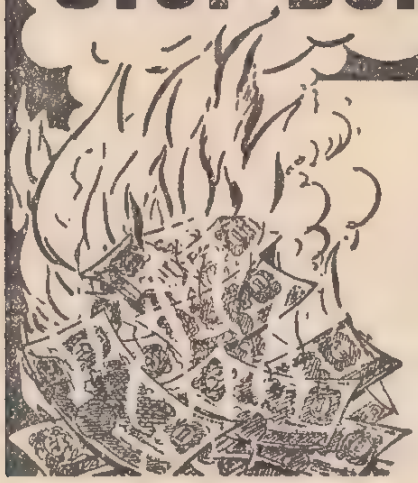

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Dear Sirs,—I received my APAL more than two years ago. When it arrived I did not use it for some time, then one day I thought well I paid for it lets have a go. At that time I was smoking 40 cigarettes a day. I put the APAL in my mouth, and I have never smoked since. To me it seemed a miracle. To sum up, I am feeling good, I can take the children out for a day instead of telling them we cannot afford it, and generally I always have a few shillings in my pocket instead of being permanently broke.
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Dear Sirs,—I thought I would write. I received my APAL some months ago, my family and I have STOPPED SMOKING, so I say thank you.
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Dear Sirs,—I have never had more pleasure in writing a letter than this one. I started using the APAL the day it arrived, and have not touched a cigarette since. I smoked about 20 cigarettes a day for more than 20 years. I cannot speak too highly of your APAL. I bless the day I sent for an APAL. J.D., Portsmouth

Dear Sirs,—About two months ago I sent for an APAL. I found it truly remarkable, I gave up smoking without any discomfort and a longing for a smoke. I am truly grateful. Mrs. M.C., Kent

Dear Sirs,—It is now almost twelve months since I got an APAL, although I was a chain smoker until the APAL arrived. I have not had the slightest inclination to take up smoking since I got my APAL.
Mrs. E.K., Dublin

Dear Sirs,—Some little time ago I sent for three APALS, for my wife, daughter and self. I was not very popular for doing this, however, since they arrived between us we have saved over £7 on cigarettes. We have completely conquered the cigarette habit. Had this state of affairs been prophesied a month ago I would never have believed it. P.O., Morthen

Dear Sirs,—One week to-morrow I received an APAL. I never thought that such a small insignificant thing could help me, but I can definitely say that it is the finest cure on the market. R.B., Nuneaton

Dear Sirs,—My APAL has been so successful that I have recommended it to several of my friends, so please send one to Mrs. M.T. Mrs. G.B., Lancs.

Dear Sirs,—I purchased an APAL in January and was amazed at its efficiency. I was smoking 45 a day, but now I no longer want to smoke.
M.W., Harrogate

Dear Sirs,—I am sending for an APAL. I have been rather impressed by recommendations received from personal acquaintances of mine. E.E., Ammanford

Dear Sirs,—I wish to thank you for the APAL you sent me some time ago as I have not smoked since. I am sending for one to give a friend.
Mrs. M.Z., Goldicote

Dear Sirs,—It is three months since I purchased my APAL. Two puffs from my APAL and smoking was cured. Thanks again, and again.
L.H., Pewlonds Gill

Dear Sirs,—After some delay I wish to report on the success of my APAL. I received it on the 28th February at 03.00 hours and replaced it for a cigarette, and I am happy to say that I have not smoked since. I was a heavy smoker for 10 years.
E.S., Shorncliffe

Dear Sirs,—I received my APAL only eight days ago, and what A PAL. I stopped smoking right away, no more craving; it's wonderful. I have been burning money for 12 years, now I have the pleasure in banking £1 a week—no more morning coughing.
Miss F.J., Bromley

Dear Sirs,—I want two APAL sent air-mail for my friends, who were rather surprised of the marvellous effect it had on me when I stopped smoking two years ago. E.P., Tango

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HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

(Dept. 45) 245 High Holborn, London, W. C. 1

Found at Blazing Star

By Bret Harte

THE FORTUNES *of Cass Beard and the mining camp of Blazing Star are both decidedly on the wane before Cass finds the strange gold ring and, with the aid of a pretty girl, the body of an unidentified dead man. Cass hopes that the discovery of the peculiarly inscribed ring presages a change of luck—but scarcely in the way things work out! This long Bret Harte tale was published in his book,* Frontier Stories, *in 1887.*

THE rain had only ceased with the gray streaks of morning at Blazing Star, and the settlement awoke to a moral sense of cleanliness, and the finding of forgotten knives, tin cups and smaller camp utensils. where the heavy showers had washed away the debris and dust heaps before the cabin doors. Indeed, it was recorded in Blazing Star that a fortunate early riser had once picked up on the highway a solid chunk of gold quartz which the rain had freed from its encumbering soil and washed into immediate and glittering popularity. Possibly this may have been the reason why early risers in that locality adopted a thoughtful habit of body during the rainy season and seldom lifted their eyes to the rifted or India-ink-washed skies above them.

Cass Beard had risen early that morning, but not with a view to discovery. A leak in his cabin roof—quite consistent with his careless, improvident habits—had roused him at 4:00 a.m. with a flooded bunk and wet blankets. The chips from his woodpile refused to kindle a fire to dry his bedclothes, and he had recourse to a more provident neighbor's to supply the deficiency. This was nearly opposite.

Cass crossed the highway, and stopped suddenly. Something glittered in the nearest red pool before him. Gold, surely! But, wonderful to relate, not an irregular, shapeless fragment of crude ore, fresh from nature's crucible, but a bit of jeweler's handicraft in the form of a plain gold ring. Looking at it more attentively, he saw that it bore the inscription: *May to Cass,*

Like most of his fellow gold seekers, Cass was superstitious. *Cass*—his own name! He tried the ring; it fitted his little finger closely. It was evidently a woman's ring.

He looked up and down the highway. No one was yet stirring. Little pools of water in the red road were beginning to glitter and grow rosy from the far-flushing east, but there was no trace of the owner of the shining waif. He knew that there was no woman in camp, and among his comrades in the settlement he remembered to have seen none wearing an ornament like that; the coincidence of the inscription to his own nickname would have been a perennial source of playful comment in a camp that made no allowance for sentimental memories. He slipped the little hoop into his pocket and thoughtfully returned to his cabin.

Two hours later, when the long, straggly procession which every morning wended its way to Blazing Star Gulch —the seat of mining operations in the settlement—began to move, Cass saw fit to interrogate his fellows.

"Ye didn't none of ye happen to drop anything round yer last night?" he asked cautiously.

"I dropped a pocketbook containing government bonds and some other securities, with between fifty and sixty thousand dollars," responded Peter Drummond carelessly, "but no matter, if any man will return a few autograph letters from foreign potentates that happened to be in it—of no value to anybody but the owner —he can keep the money. Thar's nothin' mean about me," he concluded languidly.

This statement was lightly passed over, and the men walked on with the deepest gravity.

"But hev you?" Cass presently asked another.

"I lost my pile to Jack Hamlin at draw poker over at Wingdam last night," returned the other pensively, "but I don't calkilate to find it layin' around loose."

Forced at last by this kind of irony into more detailed explanation, Cass confided to them his discovery, and produced his treasure. The result was a dozen vague surmises, only one of which seemed to be popular and to suit the dyspeptic despondency of the party —a despondency born of hastily masticated fried pork and flapjacks. The ring was believed to have been dropped by some passing road agent laden with guilty spoil.

"Ef I was you," said Drummond gloomily, "I wouldn't flourish that yer ring around much afore folks. I've seen better men nor you strung up a tree by vigilantes for having even less than that in their possession."

"And I wouldn't say much about bein' up so damned early this morning," added an even more pessimistic comrade. "It might look bad before a jury.'

With this the men sadly dispersed, leaving the innocent Cass with the ring in his hand and a general impression on his mind that he was already an object of suspicion to his comrades—an impression which, in fact, they fully intended should be left to rankle in his guileless bosom.

Notwithstanding Cass's first hopeful superstition, the ring did not seem to bring either him or the camp any luck. Daily the cleanup brought the same scant rewards to their labors, and deepened the sardonic gravity of Blazing Star. But if Cass found no material result from his treasure, it stimulated his lazy imagina-

tion, and although a dangerous and seductive stimulant, it at least lifted him out of the grooves of his half-careless, half-slovenly, but always self-contented camp life.

Heeding the wise caution of his comrades, he took the habit of wearing the ring only at night. Wrapped in his blanket, he stealthily slipped the golden circlet over his little finger and, as he averred, "slept all the better for it." Whether it ever evoked any warmer dream or vision during those calm, cold, virginlike spring nights, when even the moon and the greater planets retreated into the icy-blue, steel-like firmament, I cannot say. Enough that the superstition began to be colored a little by fancy, and his fatalism somewhat mitigated by hope. Dreams of this kind did not tend to promote his efficiency in the communal labors of the camp, and brought him a self-isolation that, however gratifying at first, soon debarred him from the benefits of that hard practical wisdom which underlay the grumblings of his fellow workers.

"I'm doggoned," said one commentator, "ef I don't believe that Cass is loony over that yer ring he found. Wears it on a string under his shirt."

Meantime, the red pools were soon dried up in the fervent June sun and riotous night winds of those altitudes. The ephemeral grasses that had quickly supplanted those pools and the chocolate-colored mud were as quickly parched and withered. The footprints of spring became vague and indefinite, and were finally lost in the impalpable dust of the summer highway.

In one of his long, aimless excursions, Cass had penetrated a thick undergrowth of buckeye and hazel and found himself quite unexpectedly on the road to Red Chief's Crossing. He knew by the lurid cloud of dust that hid the distance that the up coach had passed.

Cass had already reached that stage of superstition when the most trivial occurrence seemed to point in some way to an elucidation of the mystery of his treasure. His eyes had mechanically fallen to the ground again, as if he half expected to find in some other waif a hint or corroboration of his imaginings. Thus abstracted, the figure of a young girl on horseback in the road before the bushes he had emerged from appeared to him to have sprung directly from the ground.

"Oh, come here—please do, quick!"

Cass stared, and then moved hesitatingly toward her.

"I heard someone coming through the bushes, and I waited," she went on. "Come quick—it's something too awful for anything."

Cass could not but notice that the voice, though hurried and excited, was by no means agitated or frightened—that the eyes which looked into his sparkled with a certain kind of pleased curiosity.

"It was just here," she continued vivaciously, "just here that I went into the bush and cut a switch for my mare —and—"leading him along at a brisk trot by her side— "just here—look, see! —this is what I found."

It was scarcely thirty feet from the road. The only object that met Cass's eye was a man's stiff tall hat, lying empty and vacant in the grass. It was new, shiny, and of modish shape. But it was so incongruous, so perkily smart, and yet so feeble and helpless lying there, so ghastly ludicrous in its incapacity to adjust itself to the surrounding landscape, that

it affected him with something more than a sense of its grotesqueness, and he could only stare at it blankly.

"But you're not looking the right way," the girl said sharply. "Look there!"

Cass followed the direction of her whip. At last, what might have seemed a coat thrown carelessly on the ground met his eye, but presently he became aware of a white, rigid, aimlessly clenched hand protruding from the flaccid sleeve; mingled with it in some absurd way and half hidden by the grass lay what might have been a pair of cast-off trousers but for two rigid boots that pointed in opposite angles to the sky.

It was a dead man! So palpably dead that life seemed to have taken flight from his very clothes—so impotent, feeble, and degraded by them that the naked subject of a dissecting-table would have been less insulting to humanity. The head had fallen back and was partly hidden in a gopher burrow, but the white upturned face and closed eyes had less of helpless death in them than those wretched wrappings. Indeed, one limp hand, that lay across the swollen abdomen, lent itself to the grotesquely hideous suggestion of a gentleman sleeping off the excesses of a hearty dinner.

"Ain't he horrid?" said the girl. "But what killed him?"

Struggling between a certain fascination at the girl's cold-blooded curiosity and horror of the dead man, Cass hesitatingly lifted the helpless head. A bluish hole above the right temple and a few brown, paint-like spots on the forehead, shirt collar, and matted hair proved the only record.

"Turn him over," said the girl impatiently, as Cass was about to relinquish his burden. "Maybe you'll find another wound."

But Cass was dimly remembering certain formalities that ordinarily attend the discovery of dead bodies, and postponed a present inquest. "Perhaps you'd better ride on, miss, afore you get summoned as a witness. I'll give warning at Red Chief's Crossing and send the coroner down here."

"Let me go with you," she said earnestly. "It would be such fun, and I don't mind being a witness. Or," she added, without heeding Cass's look of astonishment, "I'll wait here till you come back."

"But you see, miss, it wouldn't seem right—" began Cass.

"But I found him first," interrupted the girl with a pout.

Staggered by this pre-emptive right, sacred to all miners, Cass stopped.

"Who is the coroner?" she asked.

"Joe Hornsby."

"The tall, lame man who was half eaten by a grizzly?"

"Yes."

"Well, look now! I'll ride on and bring him back in half an hour. There!"

"But, miss—!"

"Oh, don't mind *me*. I never saw anything of this kind before, and I want to see it *all*."

"Do you know Hornsby?" asked Cass, unconsciously a trifle irritated.

"No, but I'll bring him." She wheeled her horse into the road.

In the presence of this living energy Cass quite forgot the helpless dead. "Have you been long in these parts, miss?" he asked.

"About two weeks," she answered shortly. "Good-by, just now. Look around for the pistol or anything else you can

find, although *I* have been over the whole ground twice already."

A little puff of dust as the horse sprang into the road, a muffled shuffle, struggle, then the regular beat of hoofs—and she was gone.

After five minutes had passed, Cass regretted that he had not accompanied her —waiting in such a spot was an irksome task. Not that there was anything in the scene to awaken gloomy imaginings; the bright, truthful California sunshine scoffed at any illusion of creeping shadows or waving branches.

Once, in the rising wind, the hat rolled over—but only in a ludicrous, drunken way. A search for any further sign or token had proved futile, and Cass grew impatient. He began to hate himself for having stayed; he would have fled but for shame. Nor was his good humor restored when at the close of a weary half hour two galloping figures emerged from the dusty horizon—Hornsby and the young girl.

His vague annoyance increased as he fancied that both seemed to ignore him, the coroner barely acknowledging his presence with a nod. Assisted by the girl, whose energy and enthusiasm evidently delighted him, Hornsby raised the body for a more careful examination. The dead man's pockets were carefully searched. A few coins, a silver pencil, knife, and tobacco box were all they found. It gave no clue to his identity.

Suddenly the girl, who had with unabashed curiosity knelt beside the exploring official hands of the Red Chief coroner, uttered a cry of gratification. "Here's something! It dropped from the bosom of his shirt on the ground—look!"

She was holding in the air, between her thumb and forefinger, a folded bit of well-worn newspaper. "Shall I open it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It's a little ring," she said. "Looks like an engagement ring. Look—'*May to Cass.*'"

Cass darted forward. "It's mine," he stammered, "mine! I dropped it. It's nothing—nothing," he went on, embarrassed and blushing as the girl and her companion both stared at him, "—a mere trifle. I'll take it."

But the coroner opposed his outstretched hand. "Not much," he said significantly.

"But it's *mine*," continued Cass, indignation taking the place of shame at his discovered secret. "I found it six months ago in the road. I—picked it up."

"With your name already written on it! How handy!" said the coroner grimly.

"It's an old story," said Cass, blushing again under the half-mischievous, half-searching eyes of the girl. "All Blazing Star knows I found it."

"Then ye'll have no difficulty in proving it," said Hornsby coolly. "Just now, however, *we've* found it, and we propose to keep it for the inquest."

Cass shrugged his shoulders. Further altercation would have only heightened his ludicrous situation in the girl's eyes. He turned away, leaving his treasure in the coroner's hands.

The inquest, a day or two later, was prompt and final. No clue to the dead man's identity; no evidence sufficiently strong to prove murder or suicide; no trace of any kind inculpating any party, known or unknown, were found. But much publicity and interest were given to the proceedings by the presence of

the principal witness, a handsome girl. *To the pluck, persistency, and intellect of Miss Porter*, said the Red Chief *Recorder, Tuolumne County owes the recovery of the body.*

No one who was present at the inquest failed to be charmed with the appearance and conduct of this beautiful young lady.

Miss Porter has but lately arrived in this district, in which, it is hoped, she will become an honored resident, and continue to set an example to all lackadaisical and sentimental members of the so-called "sterner sex." After this universally recognized allusion to Cass Beard, the *Recorder* returned to its record: *Some interest was excited by what appeared to be a clue to the mystery in the discovery of a small gold engagement ring on the body. Evidence was afterward offered to show it was the property of a Mr. Cass Beard of Blazing Star, who appeared upon the scene* after *the discovery of the corpse by Miss Porter. He alleged he had dropped it in lifting the unfortunate remains of the deceased. Much amusement was created in court by the sentimental confusion of the claimant, and a certain partisan spirit shown by his fellow miners of Blazing Star. It appearing, however, by the admission of this sighing Strephon of the Foothills, that he had himself* found *this pledge of affection lying in the highway six months previous, the coroner wisely placed it in the safekeeping of the county court until the appearance of the rightful owner.*

Thus the treasure found at Blazing Star passed out of the hands of its finder.

Autumn brought an abrupt explanation of the mystery death. Kanaka Joe had been arrested for horse stealing, but had with noble candor confessed to the finer offense of manslaughter. That swift and sure justice which overtook the horse thief in those altitudes was stayed a moment and hesitated, for the victim was clearly the mysterious unknown. Curiosity got the better of an extempore judge and jury.

"It was a fair fight," said the accused, not without some human vanity, feeling that the camp hung upon his words, "and was settled by the man as was peartest and liveliest with his weepon. We had a sort of unpleasantness over at Lagrange the night afore, along of our both hevin' a monotony of four aces. We had a clinch and a stamp around, and when we were separated it was only a question of shootin' on sight. He left Lagrange at sunup the next morning, and I struck across a bit o' buckeye and underbush and came upon him, accidental-like, on the Red Chief Road. I drawed when I sighted him, and called out. He slipped from his mare and covered himself with her flanks, reaching for his holster, but she rared and backed down on him across the road and into the grass, where I got in another shot and fetched him."

"And you stole his mare?" suggested the judge.

"I got away," said the gambler simply.

Further questioning only elicited the fact that Joe did not know the name or condition of his victim. He was a stranger in Lagrange.

It was a breezy afternoon, with some turbulency in the camp, and much windy discussion over this unwonted delay of justice. The suggestion that

Joe should be first hanged for horse stealing and then tried for murder was angrily discussed, but milder counsels were offered—that the fact of the killing should be admitted only as proof of the theft. A large party from Red Chief had come over to assist in judgment, among them the coroner.

Cass Beard had avoided these proceedings, which only recalled an unpleasant experience, and was wandering with pick, pan, and wallet far from the camp. These accouterments justified any form of aimless idleness under the equally aimless title of "prospecting." He had at the end of three hours' relaxation reached the highway to Red Chief, half-hidden by blinding clouds of dust torn from the crumbling red road at every gust which swept down the mountainside.

The spot had a familiar aspect to Cass, although some freshly dug holes near the wayside, with scattered earth beside them, showed the presence of a recent prospector. He was struggling with his memory when the dust was suddenly dispersed and he found himself again at the scene of the murder. He started—he had not put foot on the road since the inquest. There lacked only the helpless dead man and the contrasting figure of the alert young woman to restore the picture.

The body was gone, it was true, but as he turned he beheld Miss Porter, a few paces distant, sitting her horse, as energetic and observant as on the first day they had met. A superstitious thrill passed over him and awoke his old antagonism.

She nodded to him slightly. "I came here to refresh my memory," she said, "as Mr. Hornsby thought I might be asked to give my evidence again at Blazing Star."

Cass carelessly struck an aimless blow with his pick against the sod and did not reply.

"And you?" she queried.

"*I* stumbled upon the place now while prospecting, or I shouldn't be here."

"Then it was *you* made these holes?"

"No," said Cass with ill-concealed disgust. "Nobody but a stranger would go foolin' round such a spot." He stopped as the significance of the speech struck him, and added surlily, "I mean—no one would dig here."

The girl laughed, showing a set of very white teeth in her square jaw. Cass averted his face.

"Do you mean to say that every miner doesn't know it's luck to dig wherever human blood has been spilled?"

Cass did not look up. "I never heard it before," he said severely.

"And you call yourself a California miner?"

"I do."

It was impossible for her to misunderstand his curt speech and unsocial manner. She stared at him and colored slightly. Lifting her reins lightly, she said, "You certainly do not seem like most of the miners I have met."

"Nor you like any girl from the East I ever met," he responded.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"What I say," he answered doggedly. Reasonable as this reply was, it immediately struck him that it was scarcely dignified or manly. But before he could explain himself Miss Porter was gone.

He met her again that very evening. The trial had been summarily suspended by the appearance of the sheriff of Cala-

veras and his posse, who took Joe from the self-constituted tribunal of Blazing Star and set his face southward toward more authoritative justice. But not before the evidence of the previous inquest had been read and the incident of the ring again delivered to the public.

The prisoner burst into an incredulous laugh and asked to see the mysterious ring. It was handed to him. Standing in the very shadow of the gallows tree—which might have been one of the pines that sheltered the billiard room in which the vigilance committee held their conclave—the prisoner gave way to a burst of merriment, so genuine and honest that the judge and jury joined in automatic sympathy. When silence was restored, an explanation was asked by the judge. But there was no response from the prisoner except a subdued chuckle.

"Did this ring belong to you?" asked the judge severely, the jury and spectators craning their ears forward with expectant smiles already on their faces.

The prisoner's eyes only sparkled maliciously as he looked around the court.

"Tell us, Joe," said a sympathetic and laughter-loving juror under his breath. "Let it out and we'll make it easy for you."

"Prisoner," said the judge, with a return of official dignity, "remember that your life is in peril. Do you refuse?"

Joe lazily laid his arm on the back of his chair with—to quote the words of an animated observer—"the air of having a Christian hope and a sequence flush in his hand," and said, "Well, as I reckon I'm not up yer for stealin' a ring that another man lets on to have found, and as fer as I kin see hez nothin' to do with the case, I do!"

And as it was here that the sheriff of Calaveras made a precipitate entry into the room, the mystery of the ring remained unsolved.

The effect of this fresh ridicule on the sensitive mind of Cass might have been foretold by Blazing Star had it ever taken that sensitiveness into consideration. He had lost the good humor and easy pliability that had tempted him to frankness, and had gradually become bitter and hard.

He had at first affected amusement over his own vanished daydream, hiding his virgin disappointment in his own breast, but when he began to turn upon his feelings he turned upon his comrades also. Cass was for a while unpopular. There is no ingratitude so revolting to the human mind as that of the butt who refuses to be one any longer. The man who rejects that immunity which laughter generally casts upon him and demands to be seriously considered deserves no mercy.

It was under these hard conditions that Cass Beard, convicted of oversentimentalism, aggravated by inconsistency, stepped into the Red Chief coach that evening. It was his habit usually to ride with the driver, but the presence of Hornsby and Miss Porter on the box seat changed his intention. Yet he had the satisfaction of seeing that neither had noticed him, and as there was no other passenger inside he stretched himself on the cushion of the back seat and gave way to moody reflections.

He quite determined to leave Blazing Star, to settle himself seriously

to the task of money-getting, and to return some day to his companions, a sarcastic, cynical, successful man, and so overwhelm them with confusion. Poor Cass had not yet learned that success would depend upon his ability to forego his past. Indeed, part of his boyhood had been cast among these men, and he was not old enough to have learned that success was not to be gauged by their standard.

The moon lit up the dark interior of the coach with a faint, poetic light. The lazy swinging of the vehicle that was bearing him away—although only for a night and a day—the solitude, the glimpses from the window of great distances full of vague possibilities, made the abused ring potent indeed. He dreamed with his eyes open.

Suddenly he awoke. The coach had stopped. The voices of men, one in entreaty, one in expostulation, came from the box. Cass mechanically put his hand to his pistol pocket.

"Thank you, but I *insist* upon getting down."

It was Miss Porter's voice, This was followed by a rapid, half-restrained interchange of words between Hornsby and the driver. Then the latter said gruffly:

"If the lady wants to ride inside, let her."

Miss Porter fluttered to the ground. She was followed by Hornsby.

"Just a minute, miss," he expostulated, half shamedly, half brusquely, "ye don't understand me. I only—"

But Miss Porter had jumped into the coach.

Hornsby placed his hand on the handle of the door. Miss Porter grasped it firmly from the inside. There was a slight struggle.

The boyish Cass, now thoroughly awakened from his dream, said in a voice he scarcely recognized himself, "Do you want this man inside?"

"No!"

Cass caught at Hornsby's wrist like a young tiger, but instinctive chivalry availed little against main strength. He only succeeded in forcing the door open in spite of Miss Porter's superior strategy—and, to tell the truth, muscle also—and threw himself passionately at Hornsby's throat, where he hung on and calmly awaited the end. However, he had driven Hornsby out into the road and the moonlight.

"Here! Somebody take my lines." The voice was that of Mountain Charley, the driver. The figure that jumped from the box and separated the struggling men belonged to this singularly direct person.

"You're riding inside?" said Charley to Cass. Before he could reply, Miss Porter's voice came from the window: "He is!"

Charley promptly bundled Cass into the coach.

"And *you*"—to Hornsby—"onless you're calkilatin' to take a little *pasear*, you're booked *outside*. Get up."

The next moment the coach was rolling on.

Meanwhile Cass, by reason of his forced entry, had been deposited in Miss Porter's lap, whence, freeing himself, he had attempted to climb over the middle seat, but in the starting of the coach was again thrown heavily against her shoulder, all of which was inconsistent with the attitude of dig-

nified reserve he had intended to display.

Miss Porter, meanwhile, recovered her good humor. "What a brute he was—ugh!" she said, tying the ribbons of her bonnet under her square chin and smoothing out her linen duster.

Cass tried to look as if he had forgotten the whole affair. "Why?—Oh, yes! I see!" he responded absently.

"I suppose I ought to thank you," she went on with a smile, "but you know, really, I could have kept him out if you hadn't pulled his wrist from outside. I'll show you—look! Put your hand on the handle there—now I'll hold the lock firmly inside. You see, you can't turn the catch!"

She indeed held the lock fast. It was a firm hand, yet soft—their fingers had touched over the handle—and looked white in the moonlight. He made no reply, but sank back in his seat with a singular sensation in the hand that had touched hers. He was in the shadow, and without being seen could abandon his reserve and glance at her face. It struck him that he had never really seen her at all before.

She was not so tall as she had appeared to be. Her eyes were not large, but the pupils were black, moist, velvety, and so convex as to seem embossed on the white. She had an indistinctive nose, a rather colorless face, whiter at the angles of the mouth and nose through the relief of tiny freckles like grains of pepper. Her mouth was straight, dark, red, but moist as her eyes.

She had drawn herself into the corner of the back seat, her wrist put through and hanging over the swinging strap, the easy lines of her plump figure swaying from side to side with the motion of the coach. Finally, forgetful of any presence in the dark corner opposite, she threw her head a little farther back, slipped a trifle lower, and placing two well-booted feet upon the middle seat, completed a charming and wholesome picture.

Five minutes elapsed. She was looking straight at the moon. Cass felt his dignified reserve becoming very much like awkwardness. He ought to be coldly polite.

"I hope you're not flustered, miss, by the—by the—" he began.

"I?" She straightened herself up in the seat, cast a curious glance into the dark corner, and then, letting herself down again, said, "Oh dear, no!"

Another five minutes elapsed. She had evidently forgotten him. She might, at least, have been civil. He took refuge again in his reserve, though it was now mixed with a certain pique.

Yet how much softer her face looked in the moonlight! Even her square jaw had lost that hard, matter-of-fact, practical indication which was so distasteful to him, and always had suggested a harsh criticism of his weakness. How moist her eyes were—actually shining in the light! How that light seemed to concentrate in the corners of the lashes, and then slipped—a flash—away! Was she?—Yes, she was crying.

Cass melted. He moved. Miss Porter put her head out of the window and drew it back in a moment, dry-eyed.

"One meets all sorts of folks traveling," said Cass, he hoped cheerfully.

"I dare say, I don't know. I never before met anyone who was rude to me. I have traveled all over the country alone and with all kinds of people

ever since I was so high. I have always gone my own way, without hindrance or trouble. I always do—I don't see why I shouldn't. Perhaps other people mayn't like it—I do; I like excitement. I like to see all that there is to see. I don't see why I can't go out without a keeper just because I'm a girl, and why I can't do what any man can do that isn't wrong—do you? Perhaps you do—perhaps you don't. Perhaps you like a girl to be always in the house, dawdling or thumping a piano or reading novels. Perhaps you think I'm bold because I don't like it, and won't lie and say I do."

She spoke sharply and aggressively, and so evidently in answer to Cass's unspoken indictment against her, that he was not surprised when she became more direct.

"You know you were shocked when I went to fetch the coroner after we found the dead body."

"Hornsby wasn't shocked," said Cass a little viciously.

"What do you mean?" she said abruptly.

"You were good friends enough until—"

"Until he insulted me just now—is that it?"

"Until he thought," stammered Cass, "that because you were—you know—not so—so careful as other girls, he could be a little freer."

"And so, because I preferred to ride a mile with him to see something real that had happened, and tried to be useful instead of looking in shop windows or promenading before the hotel—"

"—And being ornamental," interrupted Cass; but this feeble and un-Casslike attempt at playful gallantry met with a sudden check.

She drew herself together and looked out of the window. "Do you want me to walk the rest of the way home?"

"No," said Cass hurriedly, his face crimson.

"Then stop that kind of talk right there!"

There was an awkward silence before she said, "I wish I was a man"—half bitterly, half earnestly.

Cass Beard was not old and cynical enough to observe that this devout aspiration is usually uttered by those who have least reason to deplore their own femininity; and but for the rebuff he had just received would have made the usual emphatic dissent of the stronger sex, when the wish is uttered by warm lips and tender voices—a dissent generally withheld, however, when the masculine spinster dwells on the perfection of woman.

Miss Porter was apparently sincere, however, for a moment later she continued poutingly: "And yet I used to go to fires in Sacramento when I was only ten years old. I saw the theater burned down. Nobody found fault with me then."

Something made Cass ask if her father and mother objected to her boyish tastes. The reply was characteristic if not satisfactory:

"Object? I'd like to see them do it!"

The direction of the road had changed. The fickle moon now abandoned Miss Porter and sought out Cass on the front seat. It caressed the young fellow's silky mustache and long eyelashes, and took some of the sunburn from his cheeks.

"What's the matter with your neck?" said the girl suddenly.

Cass looked down to find that the collar of his smart duck sailor shirt was torn open. Something more than his white, soft skin was exposed—the shirt front was dyed quite red with blood from a slight cut on the shoulder. He remembered he had felt a scratch while struggling with Hornsby.

The girl's soft eyes sparkled. "Let *me*," she said vivaciously. "Do! I'm good at wounds. Come over here—no, stay there; I'll come over to you." She did, bestriding the back of the middle seat and dropping at his side. The magnetic fingers again touched his; he felt her warm breath on his neck as she bent over him.

"It's nothing," he said hastily, more agitated by the treatment than the wound.

"Give me your flask," she said, not heeding him. A stinging sensation as she bathed the edges of the cut with the spirits brought him back to common sense again.

"There," she said, skillfully extemporizing a bandage from her handkerchief and a compress from his cravat. "Now button your coat over your chest, so, and don't catch cold." She insisted on buttoning it for him—greater even than the feminine delight in a man's strength is the ministration to his weakness.

Yet when this was finished she drew a little away from him in some embarrassment—an embarrassment she wondered at, as his skin was finer, his touch gentler, his clothes cleaner, and—not to put too fine a point upon it—he exhaled an atmosphere much sweeter than belonged to most of the men her boyish habits had brought her into contact with, not excepting her own father. Later she even exempted her own mother from the possession of this divine effluence.

After a moment she asked suddenly, "What are you going to do with Hornsby?"

Cass had not thought of him; his short-lived rage was past with the occasion that provoked it. Without any fear of his adversary, he would have been quite willing to meet him no more. He said, "That will depend upon him."

"Oh, you won't hear from him again," she said confidently, "but you really ought to get up a little more muscle—you've no more than a girl." She stopped, a little confused.

"What shall I do with your handkerchief?" asked the uneasy Cass, anxious to change the subject.

"Oh, keep it if you want to—only don't show it to everybody as you did that ring you found." Seeing signs of distress in his face, she added, "Of course, that was all nonsense. If you had cared so much for the ring you couldn't have talked about it or shown it, could you?"

It relieved him to think that this might be true; he certainly had not looked at it in that light before.

"But did you really find it?" she asked with sudden gravity. "Really, now?"

"Yes."

"And there was no real May in the case?"

"Not that I know of," laughed Cass, secretly pleased.

But Miss Porter, after eyeing him critically for a moment, jumped up and climbed back again to her seat. "Perhaps

you had better give me that handkerchief back."

Cass began to unbutton his coat.

"No, no! Do you want to take your death of cold?" she screamed. And Cass, to avoid this direful possibility, rebuttoned his coat over the handkerchief and a peculiarly pleasing sensation.

Very little more was said until the rattling, bounding descent of the coach denoted the approach to Red Chief. The straggling main street disclosed itself, light by light. In the flash of glittering windows and the sound of eager voices, Miss Porter descended, without waiting for Cass's proferred assistance, and anticipated Mountain Charley's descent from the box. A few indistinguishable words passed between them.

"You kin freeze to me, miss," said Charley; and she, turning her frank laugh and frankly opened palm to Cass, half returned the pressure of his hand and slipped away.

A few days after the stagecoach incident Mountain Charley drew up beside Cass on the Blazing Star turnpike and handed him a small packet. "I was told to give ye that by Miss Porter. Listen —it's that old doggoned ring o' yours that's be'n in all the papers. She bamboozled that saphead county judge, Boompointer, into givin' it to her. Take my advice and sling it away for some other feller to pick up and get loony over. That's all!"

"Did she say anything?" said Cass anxiously, as he received his lost treasure somewhat coldly.

"Well, yes, I reckon—she asked me to stand betwixt Hornsby and you. So don't *you* tackle him, and I'll see *he* don't tackle you," and with a portentous wink Mountain Charley whipped up his horses and was gone.

Cass opened the packet. It contained nothing but the ring. Unmitigated by any word of greeting, remembrance, or even raillery, it seemed almost an insult. Had she intended to flaunt his folly in his face, or had she believed he still mourned for it and deemed its recovery a sufficient reward for his slight service?

For an instant he felt tempted to follow Charley's advice and cast this symbol of folly and contempt into the dust of the mountain road. And had she not made his humiliation complete by begging Charley's interference between him and his enemy? He would go home and send back the handkerchief she had given him. But here the unromantic reflection that, although he had washed it that very afternoon in the solitude of his own cabin, he could not possibly iron it, but must send it rough-dried, stayed his indignant feet.

Two or three days—a week—a fortnight even—of this hopeless resentment filled Cass's breast. Then the news of Kanaka Joe's acquittal in the state court momentarily revived the story of the ring and revamped a few stale jokes in the camp. But the interest soon flagged; the fortunes of the little community of Blazing Star had been failing for some months; and with early snows in the mountains and wasted capital in fruitless schemes on the river there was little room for the indulgence of that lazy and original humor which belonged to their lost youth and prosperity. Blazing Star was played out—not dug out, worked out, or washed out, but dissipated in a year of speculation and chance.

Cass struggled manfully against this tide of fortune, and even evoked the

slow praise of his companions. Better still, he won in himself a consciousness of increased strength, health, power, and self-reliance. He began to turn his quick imagination and perception to some practical account, and made one or two discoveries which quite startled his more experienced and more conservative companions.

Nevertheless, his discoveries and labors were not of a kind that produced immediate pecuniary realization, and Blazing Star, which consumed so many pounds of pork and flour daily, unfortunately did not produce a daily equivalent in gold. Blazing Star lost its credit. Blazing Star was hungry, dirty, and ragged. Blazing Star was beginning to set.

In addition to the general ill luck of the camp, Cass suffered his own individual mischance. He had resolutely determined to forget Miss Porter and all that tended to recall the unlucky ring, but cruelly enough she was the only thing that refused to be forgotten—her undulating figure reclined opposite him in the weird moonlight of his ruined cabin; her voice mingled with the song of the river by whose banks he toiled; her eyes and touch thrilled him in his dreams.

Partly for this reason and partly because his clothes were beginning to be patched and torn, he avoided Red Chief and any place where he would be likely to meet her. In spite of this precaution he had once seen her driving in a pony carriage, but so smartly and fashionably dressed that he drew back in the cover of a wayside willow so she might pass without recognition. He looked down upon his red-splashed clothes and grimy, soil-streaked hands, and for a moment half hated her.

His comrades seldom spoke of her, but he heard from time to time that she had been seen at balls and parties, apparently enjoying those frivolities of her sex she affected to condemn.

It was a Sabbath morning in early spring that he was returning from an ineffectual attempt to enlist a capitalist at the county seat to redeem the fortunes of Blazing Star. He was pondering over the narrowness of that capitalist, who had evidently connected Cass's present appearance with the future of that struggling camp, when he became so footsore that he was obliged to accept a lift from a wayfaring teamster. As the slowly lumbering vehicle passed the new church on the outskirts of the town the congregation were sallying forth.

It was too late to jump down and run away, and Cass dared not ask his new-found friend to whip up his cattle. Conscious of his unshaven beard and ragged garments, he kept his eyes fixed upon the road. A voice that thrilled him called his name.

It was Miss Porter, a resplendent vision of silk, laces, and Easter flowers —yet actually running, with some of her old dash and freedom, beside the wagon. As the astonished teamster drew up before this elegant apparition, she panted:

"Why did you make me run so far, and why didn't you look up?"

Cass, trying to hide the patches on his knees beneath a newspaper, stammered that he had not seen her.

"And you did not hold your head down purposely?"

"No," said Cass.

"Why haven't you been to Red Chief? Why didn't you answer my message about the ring?" she asked swiftly.

"You sent nothing but the ring,"

said Cass, coloring as he glanced at the teamster.

"Why, *that* was a message, you born idiot."

Cass stared. The teamster smiled. Miss Porter gazed anxiously at the wagon.

"I think I'd like a ride in there—it looks awfully good." She glanced mischievously at the lingering and curious congregation. "May I?"

Cass protested strongly. It was dirty—he was not sure it was even wholesome—she would be so uncomfortable—he himself was only going a few rods farther, and in that time she might ruin her dress—

"Oh, yes," she said a little bitterly, "certainly, my dress must be looked after. And—what else?"

"People might think it strange—believe I had invited you," continued Cass hesitatingly.

"When I had only invited myself? Thank you! Good-by." She waved her hand and stepped back from the wagon.

Cass would have given worlds to recall her, but he sat still, and the vehicle moved on in moody silence. At the first crossroad he jumped down. "Thank you," he said to the teamster.

"You're welcome," returned that gentleman, regarding him curiously. "But the next time a gal like that asks to ride in this yer wagon I reckon I won't take the vote of any dead-head passenger. *Adios*, young feller. Don't stay out late—ye might be run off with by some gal, and what would your mother say?"

Cass said nothing, but as he walked away he was conscious that the effect of his dignified action was somewhat mitigated by the presence of a large patch from a material originally used as a flour sack, which had repaired his trousers and still bore the ironical legend: *Best Superfine.*

The summer brought warmth and promise and some blossom, if not absolute fruition, to Blazing Star. The long days drew nature into closer communion with man, and hopefulness followed the discontent of their winter seclusion. It was easier, too, for capital to be wooed and won into making a picnic in these mountain solitudes than when high water stayed the fords and drifting snow blocked the Sierran trails.

At the close of one of these Arcadian days Cass was smoking before the door of his lonely cabin when he was astounded by the onset of a dozen of his companions. Peter Drummond, far in the van, was waving a newspaper like a victorious banner.

"All's right now, Cass, old man!" he panted as he stopped before Cass and shoved back his eager followers.

"What's all right?" asked Cass dubiously.

"*You!* You kin rake down the pile now—you're hunky, you're on velvet! Listen!" He opened the newspaper and read with annoying deliberation:

"Lost—If the finder of a plain gold ring, bearing the inscription, 'May to Cass,' alleged to have been picked up on the highroad near Blazing Star on the 4th March, 186—, will apply to Bookham & Sons, bankers, 1007 Y Street, Sacramento, he will be suitably rewarded either for the recovery of the ring, or for such facts as may identify it, or the locality where it was found."

Cass rose and frowned savagely on his comrades.

"No, no!" cried a dozen voices assuringly. "It's all right—honest Injun—true as gospel—no joke, Cass!"

"Here's the paper, Sacramento *Union* of yesterday—look for yourself," said Drummond handing him the well-worn journal. "And you see how darned lucky you are—it ain't necessary for you to produce the ring, so if that old biled owl of a Boompointer don't give it back to ye, it's all the same."

"And they say nobody but the finder need apply," interrupted another. "That shuts out Boompointer, or Kanaka Joe, for the matter o' that."

"It's clear that it means you, Cass, ez much ez if they'd given your name," added a third.

Cass had never told them of the restoration of the ring, and it was evident that Mountain Charley had also kept silent. He could not speak now without violating a secret, and he was pleased that the ring itself no longer played an important part in the mystery. But what was that mystery, and why was the ring secondary to himself? Why was so much stress laid on his finding it?

"You see," said Drummond, as if answering his unspoken thought, "that 'ar gal—for it is a gal, in course—hez read all about it in the papers, and hez sort o' took a shine to ye. It don't make a bit o' difference who in thunder Cass is or was, for I reckon she's kicked him over by this time—"

"Sarved him right, too, for losin' the gal's ring and then layin' low and keepin' dark about it," interrupted a sympathizer.

"And she's just weakened over the romantic, high-toned way you stuck to it," continued Drummond, forgetting the sarcasms he had previously hurled at this romance. The whole camp by this time had become convinced that it had fostered and developed a chivalrous devotion which was now at the point of pecuniary realization.

It was generally accepted that "she" was the daughter of this banker and that, in the circumstances, the happy father could do no less than develop the resources of Blazing Star at once. Even if there were no relationship, what opportunity could be more fit for presenting to capital a locality that even produced engagement rings and, as Jim Fauquier put it, "the men ez knew how to keep 'em." It was this sympathetic Virginian who took Cass aside with the following generous suggestion:

"If you find that you and the gal couldn't hitch hosses, owin' to your not likin' red hair or a game leg"—Blazing Star had, for no reason whatever, attributed these unprepossessing qualities to the mysterious advertiser—"you might let me in—you might say ez how I used to jest worship that ring with you, and allers wanted to borry it on Sundays. If anything comes of it—why, we're pardners!"

The outfitting of Cass for what now was felt to be a diplomatic representation of the community was a serious question. "He might," suggested Fauquier, "drop in jest as he is—kinder as if he'd got keerless of the world, being lovesick." But Cass objected strongly, and was borne out in his objection by his younger comrades.

At last a pair of white duck trousers, a red shirt, a flowing black silk scarf, and a Panama hat were procured at

Red Chief on credit, after a judicious exhibition of the advertisement. A heavy wedding ring, the property of Drummond—who was not married—was also lent as a graceful suggestion, and at the last moment Fauquier affixed to Cass's scarf an enormous specimen pin of gold and quartz.

"It sorter indicates the auriferous wealth of this region, and the old man needn't know I won it at draw poker in Frisco," said Fauquier. "Ef you pass on the gal, you kin hand it back to me and *I'll* try it on."

Forty dollars for expenses were put into Cass's hands, and the entire camp accompanied him to the cross-roads where he was to meet the Sacramento coach, which eventually carried him away, followed by a benediction of waving hats and exploding revolvers.

Cass, of course, did not participate in the extravagant hopes of his comrades, and he utterly rejected their matrimonial speculations in his behalf. Outwardly he kept his own counsel with good-humored assent. But there was something fascinating in the situation, and while he felt he had forever abandoned his romantic dream he was not displeased to know that it might have proved a reality.

Nor was it distasteful to him to think that Miss Porter would hear of it and regret her late inability to appreciate his sentiment. If he really was the object of some opulent maiden's passion, he would show Miss Porter how he could sacrifice the most brilliant prospects for her sake. Alone on the top of the coach, he projected one of those most satisfying conversations in which imaginative people delight, but which unfortunately never come quite up to rehearsal.

"Dear Miss Porter," he would say, addressing the back of the driver, "if I could remain faithful to a dream of my youth, however illusive and unreal, can you believe that for the sake of lucre I could be false to the one real passion that alone supplanted it?"

In the composition and delivery of this eloquent statement an hour was happily forgotten—the only drawback to its complete effect was that a misplacing of adjectives in rapid repetition did not seem to make the slightest difference and Cass found himself saying. "Dear Miss Porter, if I could be false to the dream of my youth . . . can you believe I could be faithful to the one real passion . . ." with equal satisfaction. As Miss Porter was reputed to be well off, if the unknown was poor that might be another drawback.

The banking house of Bookham & Sons did not present a mysterious appearance. It was eminently practical and matter-of-fact; it was obtrusively open and glassy; nobody would have thought of leaving a secret there that would have been inevitably circulated over the counter.

Cass felt an uncomfortable sense of incongruity in himself, in his story, in his treasure, compared to this temple of disenchanting realism. With the awkwardness of an embarrassed man, he was holding prominently in his hand an envelope containing the ring and advertisement as a voucher for his intrusion when the nearest clerk took it from his hand, opened it, took out the ring, returned it, and said briskly:

"T'other shop, next door, young man."

Cass stepped to the door, saw that "t'other shop" was a pawnbroker's, and returned with a flashing eye and heightened color. "It's an advertisement I've come to answer," he began.

The clerk cast a look at Cass's scarf and pin. "Place taken yesterday—no room for any more," he said abruptly.

Cass grew pale, but his old experience in Blazing Star repartee stood him in good stead. "If it's *your* place you mean," he said coolly, "I reckon you might put a dozen men in the hole you're rattlin' around in—but it's this advertisement I'm after. If Bookham isn't in, maybe you'll send me one of his grown-up sons."

The production of the advertisement and some laughter from the bystanders had its effect. The pert young clerk retired, then returned to lead the way to the office.

Cass's heart sank as he was confronted by a dark, iron-gray man, in dress, features, speech, and action uncompromisingly opposed to Cass—his ring and his romance. When the young man had told his story and produced his treasure he paused.

The banker scarcely glanced at it, but said impatiently, "Well, your papers?"

"My papers?"

"Yes—proof of your identity. You say your name is Cass Beard—good! But what have you got to prove it? How can I tell who you are?"

To a sensitive young man there is no form of suspicion that is as nerve-wracking and demoralizing as the questioning of his identity. Cass felt the insult in the doubt of his word and the palpable sense of his inability to prove it. The banker watched him keenly but not unkindly.

"Come," he said at length, "this is not my affair; if you can legally satisfy the lady for whom I am only agent, well and good. I believe you can; I only warn you that you must. And my present inquiry was to keep her from losing her time with imposters—a class I don't think you belong to. There's her card. Good day."

Miss Mortimer. It was not the banker's daughter! The first illusion of Blazing Star was rudely dispelled. But the care taken to shield her from imposture indicated a person of wealth; of her youth and beauty Cass no longer thought.

The address given was not distant. With a beating heart, he rang the bell of a respectable-looking house and was ushered into a drawing-room. Instinctively he felt that the room was only temporarily inhabited—an air peculiar to the best lodgings—and when the door opened upon a tall lady in deep mourning he was still more convinced of an incongruity between the occupant and her surroundings. With a smile born of a habit of familiarity and ease but tempered by a recent restraint, she motioned him to a chair.

Miss Mortimer was still young, still handsome and fashionably dressed, still attractive. From her first greeting to the end of the interview Cass felt that she knew all about him. This relieved him from the onus of proving his identity, but seemed to put him vaguely at a disadvantage. It increased his sense of inexperience and youthfulness.

"I hope you will believe," she began, "that the few questions I have to ask you are to satisfy my own heart, but for no other purpose." She smiled sadly as she went on: "Had it been otherwise I would have instituted legal inquiry,

and left this interview to someone cooler, calmer, and less interested than myself.

"But I think—I *know* I can trust you. Perhaps we women are weak and foolish to talk of an instinct, and when you know my story you may have reason to believe that but little dependence can be placed on that; but I am not wrong in saying, am I"—with a sad smile—"that you are not above that weakness?"

She paused, closed her lips tightly, and clasped her hands before her. "You say you found that ring in the road some three months before—the—the—you know what I mean—the body was discovered?"

"Yes."

"You thought it might have been dropped by someone in passing?"

"I thought so, yes—it belonged to no one in the camp."

"Before your cabin or on the highway?"

"Before my cabin."

"You are *sure?*" There was something so sweetly sad in her smile that it oddly made Cass color.

"But my cabin is near the road," he suggested.

"I see. And there was nothing else—no paper or envelope?"

"Nothing."

"And you kept it because of the odd resemblance one of the names bore to yours?"

"Yes."

"For no other reason?"

"None." Yet Cass felt he was blushing.

"You'll forgive my repeating a question you have already answered, but I am so anxious. There was some attempt to prove at the inquest that the ring had been found on the body of the—unfortunate man. But you tell me it was not so?"

"I can swear it."

"Good God—the traitor!" She took a hurried step forward, turned to the window, and then came back to Cass with a voice broken with emotion. "I have told you I could trust you—that ring was mine!"

She stopped, and then went on hurriedly: "Years ago I gave it to a man who deceived and wronged me—a man whose life since then has been a shame and a disgrace to all who knew him—once a gentleman, he sank so low as to become the associate of thieves and ruffians—sank so low that when he died by violence, a traitor even to them, his own confederate shrank from him and left him to a nameless grave. That man's body you found."

Cass started. "His name was—?"

"Cass—Henry Cass. You see, Providence seems to have brought that ring to you. But you ask me why, knowing this, I am so eager to know if the ring was found by you in the road, or if it was found on his body. Listen—it is part of my mortification that the story goes that he once showed this ring, boasted of it, staked it and lost it at the gambling-table to one of his vile comrades."

"Kanaka Joe," said Cass with a vivid recollection of Joe's merriment at the trial.

"The same. Don't you see, if the ring had been found on him I could believe that somewhere in his heart he still kept respect for the woman he had wronged. I am a woman—a foolish woman, I know—but you have crushed that hope forever."

"But why have you sent for me?" asked Cass, touched by her emotion.

"To know it for certain," she said, almost fiercely. "Can't you understand that a woman like me must know a thing once and forever? But you *can* help me. I did not send for you only to pour my wrongs into your ears. You must take me with you to the place—to the spot where you found the ring—to the spot where you found the body—to the spot where he lies. You must do it secretly, that none shall know me."

Cass hesitated. He was thinking of his companions and the collapse of their painted bubble. How could he keep the secret from them?

"If it is money you need, do not let that stop you. I have no right to your time without recompense. There has been a thousand dollars awaiting my order at Bookham's when the ring should be delivered. It shall be doubled if you help me in this last moment."

He answered promptly, "I will take you there." He could convey her safely there, invent some story of a reward delayed for want of proofs, and afterward share the reward with his friends.

She took his hands in both of hers, raised them to her lips, and smiled. The shadow of grief and restraint seemed to have fallen from her face, and a half-mischievous, half-coquettish gleam in her dark eyes touched the susceptible Cass in so subtle a fashion that he regained the street in some confusion.

He wondered what Miss Porter would have thought. But was he not returning to her, a fortunate man, with $1000 in his pocket? Why should he remember he was handicapped by a pretty woman and a pathetic episode? It did not make the proximity less pleasant as he helped her into the coach that evening.

It was arranged that he should leave her at the Red Chief Hotel while he continued on to Blazing Star, returning at noon to bring her with him when he could do it without exposing her to recognition. The gray dawn came soon enough, and the coach drew up at the Red Chief while the lights in the barroom and diningroom of the hotel were still struggling with the flushing east.

Cass alighted, placed Miss Mortimer in the hands of the landlady, and returned to the vehicle. It was still musty and close, with half-awakened passengers. There was a vacated seat on the top, which Cass climbed up to, and abstractedly threw himself beside a figure muffled in shawls and rugs.

There was a slight movement among the multitudinous wrappings, and then the figure turned to him and said dryly, "Good morning!" It was Miss Porter.

"Have you been here long?" he stammered.

"All night."

He would have given worlds to leave her at that moment; he would have jumped from the starting coach to save himself any explanation of the embarrassment he was furiously conscious of showing, without, as he believed, any adequate cause. Yet, like all inexperienced, sensitive men, he dashed blindly into that explanation—worse, he even told his secret at once, then and there, and then sat abashed and conscience-stricken, with an added sense of its utter futility.

"And this," summed up the girl, with a slight shrug of her pretty shoulders, "is *your May?*"

Cass would have recommenced his story.

"No, don't, pray! It isn't interesting —nor original. Do *you* believe it?"

"I do," said Cass indignantly.

"How lucky! Then let me go to sleep."

Cass, still furious but uneasy, did not again address her.

When the coach stopped at Blazing Star she asked him indifferently, "When does this sentimental pilgrimage begin?"

"I return for her at one o'clock," replied Cass stiffly.

He kept his word. He appeased his eager companions with a promise of future fortune, exhibiting the present and tangible reward. By a circuitous route known only to himself he led Miss Mortimer to the road before the cabin. There was a pink flush of excitement on her somewhat faded cheek.

"And it was here?" she asked eagerly.

"I found it here."

"And the body?"

"That was afterward. Over in that direction—beyond the clump of buckeyes, on the Red Chief turnpike."

"And anyone coming from the road we left just now and going to—to that place, would have to cross just here? Tell me," she said with a strange laugh, laying her cold, nervous hand on his, "wouldn't they?"

"They would."

"Let us go to that place."

Cass stepped out briskly to avoid observation and gain the woods beyond the highway.

"You have crossed here before," she said. "There seems to be a trail."

"I may have made it—it's a short cut to the buckeyes."

"You never found anything else on the trail?"

"I told you before, you remember, the ring was all I found."

"Ah, true!" she smiled sweetly. "It was *that* which made it seem so odd to you. I forgot."

In half an hour they approached the buckeyes. During the walk she had taken rapid cognizance of everything in her path. When they crossed the road and Cass had pointed out the scene of the killing, she looked anxiously around.

"You are sure we are not seen?"

"Quite sure."

"You will not think me foolish if I ask you to wait here while I go in there"—she pointed to the ominous thicket near them—"alone?" She was quite pale.

Cass's heart, which had grown somewhat cold since his interview with Miss Porter, melted at once. "Go—I will stay here."

He waited five minutes. She did not return. What if the poor creature had determined upon suicide on the spot where her faithless lover had fallen? He was reassured in another moment by the rustle of skirts in the undergrowth.

"I was becoming quite alarmed," he said aloud.

"You have reason to be," returned a hurried voice.

He started. It was Miss Porter who stepped swiftly out of the cover.

"Look," she said. "Look at that man down the road. He has been tracking you two ever since you left the cabin. Do you know who he is?"

"No!"

"Then listen—it's Three-Fingered Dick, one of the escaped road agents. I know him!"

"Let's go and warn her," said Cass eagerly.

Miss Porter laid her hand upon his shoulder. "I don't think she'll thank you," she said dryly. "Perhaps you'd better see what she's doing first."

Utterly bewildered, he followed her. She crept like a cat through the thicket. Suddenly she paused.

"Look!" she whispered viciously. "Look at the tender vigils of your brokenhearted May!"

Cass saw the woman who had left him a few minutes before on her knees on the grass, with long thin fingers digging like a ghoul in the earth. He scarcely had time to notice her eager face and eyes, cast now and then back toward the spot where she had left him, before there was a crash in the bushes and a man—the stranger of the road—leaped to her side.

"Run," he said, "run for it now. You're watched!"

"Oh, that man, Beard!" she said contemptuously.

"No, another in a wagon. Quick—you know the place now, you can come later—run!" Half dragging, half lifting her, he bore her through the bushes.

Scarcely had they closed behind the pair when Miss Porter ran to the spot vacated by the woman. "Look!" she cried triumphantly. "Look!"

Cass looked—and sank on his knees beside her.

"It *was* worth a thousand dollars, wasn't it?" She repeated maliciously, "Wasn't it? But you ought to return it—really you ought!"

Cass could scarcely articulate. "But how did you know it?" he finally gasped.

"Oh, I suspected something—there was a woman, and you know you're *such* a fool!"

Cass rose stiffly.

"Don't be a greater fool now, but go and bring my horse and wagon from the hill, and don't say anything to the driver."

"Then you did not come alone?"

"No—it would have been bold and improper."

"Please!"

"And to think it *was* the ring, after all, that pointed to this," she said.

"The ring that *you* returned to me."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Don't, please, the wagon is coming."

In the next morning's edition of the Red Chief *Chronicle* appeared the following startling intelligence:

EXTRAORDINARY DISCOVERY! —FINDING OF THE STOLEN TREASURE OF WELLS, FARGO & CO. OVER $300,000 RECOVERED.

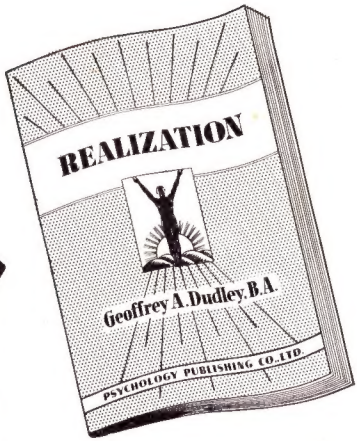
Our readers will remember the notorious robbery of Wells, Fargo & Co.'s treasure from the Sacramento and Red Chief Pioneer Coach on the night of last September 1. *Although most of the gang were arrested, it is known that two escaped, who, it was presumed, cached the treasure, amounting to nearly* $500,000 *in gold,*

drafts, and jewelry, as no trace of the property was found. Yesterday our esteemed fellow citizen, Mr. Cass Beard, long and favorably known in this county, succeeded in exhuming the treasure in a copse of hazel near the Red Chief turnpike, adjacent to the spot where an unknown body was lately discovered. This body is now strongly suspected to be that of one Henry Cass, a disreputable character who has since been ascertained to have been one of the road agents who escaped. The matter is now under legal investigation. The successful result of the search is due to a systematic plan evolved from the genius of Mr. Beard, who has devoted over a year to this labor. It was first suggested to him by the finding of a ring now definitely identified as part of the treasure, which was supposed to have been dropped from Wells, Fargo & Co.'s boxes by the robbers in their midnight flight through Blazing Star.

In the same journal appeared the no less important intelligence which explains while it completes this chronicle:

It is rumored that a marriage is shortly to take place between the hero of the late treasure discovery and a young lady of Red Chief whose devoted aid and assistance to this important work is well known to this community.

"He's a famous Indian fighter, but he's getting pretty feeble now."



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In This Issue

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The fighting instinct and impelling urge to kill which Buck Duane inherited from his gun-fighting father has never been put to the test until he clashes with Cal Bain and turns a gun on him, which forces him to leave his home and family for the Texas border country, stamping ground for hundreds of wanted men — rustlers and gun-fights, where he subsequently becomes the most notorious lone wolf of the border. His adventures, culminating in a dramatic encounter with a Ranger captain, make stories of resourcefulness and courage which will thrill even the most hard-boiled Western-story reader.

FOUND AT BLAZING STAR *by Bret Harte*

The fortunes of Cass Beard and the mining camp of Blazing Star are both decidedly on the wane before Cass finds the strange gold ring and, with the aid of a pretty girl, the body of an unidentified dead man. Cass hopes that the discovery of the peculiarly inscribed ring presages a change of luck — but scarcely in the way things work out! This long Bret Harte tale was published in his book, *Frontier Stories*, in 1887.

DOC SPERRY'S BIG CASE *by Giff Cheshire*

Medical practice in the Chuckaluck country includes plenty of absorbing cases for Doc Sperry, but none quite so complicated and dramatic as that of Maddie Colbert's gluteal abrasions. Maddie's soaring ambitions start a train of events which she has plenty of cause to regret — especially after she shucks her petticoat for emergency use as a signal flag. This story is published here for the first time.

And many more stirring stories and articles of the colourful West.

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